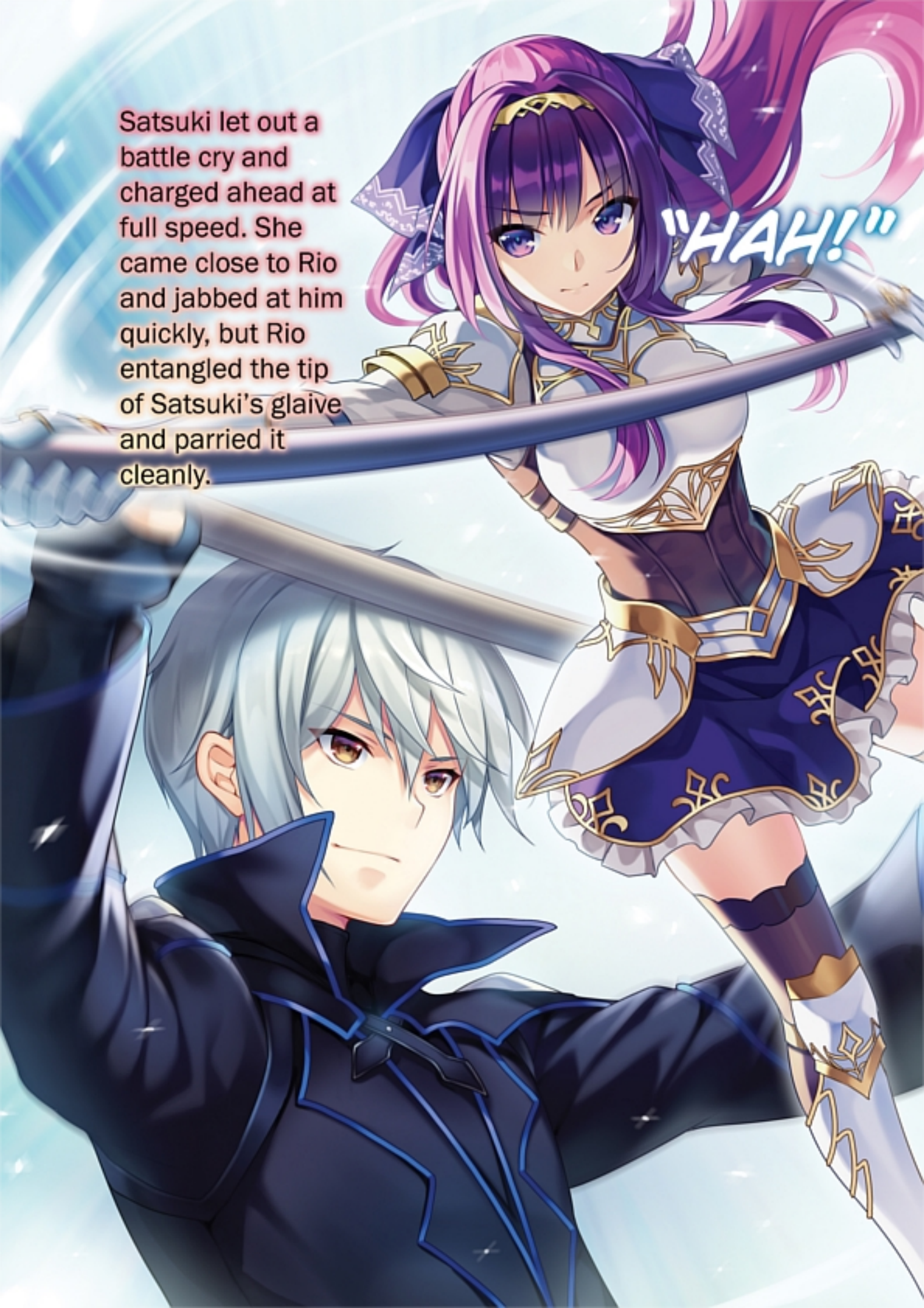
Yuri Kitayama
Illustrator • Riv
10
Seirei Gensouki: Spirit Chronicles
Forget-Me-Not of Rebirth

Rio extended his hand to escort Liselotte. She took his hand gently and the two of them left the dance floor, all while stealing a glance at Rio's side profile.

Seirei Gensouki: Spirit Chronicles


Satsuki let out a battle cry and charged ahead at full speed. She came close to Rio and jabbed at him quickly, but Rio entangled the tip of Satsuki's glaive and parried it cleanly.
"HAH!"

CHARACTER INTRODUCTION

Rio
A boy reincarnated into another world with the memories from his previous life. His current priority is to secure Miharu, Aki, and Masato's safety.

Amakawa Haruto
Rio's identity in a previous life as a Japanese university student. Miharu's childhood friend and Aki's half-brother.

Aishia
The contracted spirit that was sleeping within Rio. Is apparently an upper high class spirit, but has no memories.

Ayase Miharu
Haruto's childhood friend and first love. Wants to stay with Rio despite knowing the truth of who he is.

OTHER WORLDERS

Sakata Hiroaki
Young man summoned from another world as a hero.

Sendo Aki
Haruto's half-sister and Masato's stepsister.

Sendo Masato
Bright and honest; Aki's stepbrother.

SPIRIT FOLK VILLAGE

Sara
Silver Werewolf Girl

Orphia
High Elf Girl

Alma
Elder Dwarf Girl

Arslan
Werelion Boy

Vera
Silver Werewolf Girl & Sara's Sister

Dryas
High Class Spirit of the Spirit Folk Village

KINGDOM OF BELTRUM

Celia Claire
Daughter of a count and Rio's former academy teacher. Currently in hiding as she travels with Rio.

Latifa
Werefox Girl & Former Slave. Reincarnated from another world and fondly calls Rio "Onii-chan."

KINGDOM OF GALARC

Liselotte Cretia
Daughter of a Duke & President of the Ricca Guild

Christina Beltrum
First Princess of the Kingdom of Beltrum

Flora Beltrum
Second Princess of the Kingdom of Beltrum

Prologue: Determination

I thought vengeance was true justice. I swore to live the path of vengeance. Vengeance was my reason for being. Because I thought vengeance was my only salvation…

I couldn't die until I had my revenge. That was how I was able to endure those harsh days. No matter how ugly and filthy I came out the other end…

I was able to cling to life.

If I could have my revenge, I thought I didn't care about what would happen to me.

But after I regained my memories from my life in Japan…

I started to believe that vengeance might be evil.

But the flames of hatred still burned viciously in my chest. My past and present selves, and their opposing personalities and values, contradicted each other and clashed.

Eventually, the fusion of those personalities created a new way of thinking.

Seeking an answer to the contradiction, seeking happiness in an unattainable past, seeking meaning in an unsalvageable death…

I started to scream soundlessly.

Unable to see ahead of me, scared and unsure of what is right, unable to reveal my ugly self to anyone…

Then, even someone like me began to feel happiness. The happiness I had lost in the past—my salvation—had taken on the same form and was surprisingly close by.

Warm to the touch, reassuring to be with, and comforting to be near… It wasn't the exact same thing, but

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it was a beacon to me all the same.

That was why, each time I touched that happiness, each time I saw that happiness, the hatred burning in my chest flickered just a bit. I wanted to touch that warm happiness forever.

But I couldn't forget my painful past. I couldn't avert my eyes from the unpleasant reality. Because if I forgot, if I averted my eyes…

I felt like I would forget the happiness I had lost as well.

Because it felt like I would be sealing away my precious happiness along with the problem.

Because it felt like I would be lying to myself.

I was scared of forgetting.

Because I was a coward, I couldn't avert my eyes.

That's why I swore, on that day in my parents' homeland…

I could carry that contradiction with me.

I could keep screaming soundlessly.

In order to bring salvation to the past, I'd sacrifice the present and future. Until the day I had my revenge, I would dedicate my life to living this way.

Even now, that hasn't changed. Even now, though the happiness that shines grows stronger each day, I have no intention of changing that way of living.

Even if the flames of hatred burning in my chest flickered strongly, I couldn't change that.

Even if there was no happiness waiting for me after my vengeance…

It didn't matter if I couldn't be happy, as long as the one precious to me was happy instead. That would be my punishment for the crime I was trying to commit—and it would also be my justification.

Thinking of it that way made things a little easier.

However, that was a contradiction in itself.

That was why my soundless scream grew louder.

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Both my happiness, and the happiness of the one precious to me, grew further out of reach.

And yet, even then…

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Chapter 1: After the Audience

In the audience hall of the Galarc Kingdom…

“Haruto Amakawa. If I could please introduce myself as that from here on…” Rio said resolutely to King Francois, in the presence of all the important figures from foreign kingdoms that were present.

“Amakawa…”

“Is it a word from another kingdom?”

“I am not familiar with it…”

“Neither am I.”

“What kind of meaning does it hold?”

The unfamiliar family name didn’t quite register with them, as whispers spread through the hall. At the same time, there were people with notable reactions present: Satsuki and the other three heroes who were summoned from Japan.

“Haruto Amakawa… Amakawa… Haruto?” Rui muttered under his breath. When he flipped the order of the first name and last name around, it sounded like a Japanese name…

“Hey, isn’t that a Japanese name? He said he was born and raised in this world, though. What’s going on?” Hiroaki furrowed his brows in suspicion.

“Just who is he…” Takahisa looked at Rio in confusion before immediately looking at Miharu, who had lived together with Rio up until now.

“…” Miharu continued watching Rio with bated breath. Satsuki stood right beside her. “Amakawa Haruto. That’s his Japanese name, then? It sounds kind of familiar, though…” she muttered quietly so that no one could hear, cocking her

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head with an unsettled look as she mulled over the name.

It was only natural that she would find the name familiar. Haruto and Satsuki had met once before, on the day of their high school's entrance ceremony.

Having experienced thirteen years worth of time since then, Amakawa Haruto— No, Rio had completely forgotten Satsuki's name, but for Satsuki, the event had occurred a few months ago.

On the day of the entrance ceremony, it had been Satsuki's duty as a student council member to oversee the new students. But the number of students she actually spoke to long enough to catch their names was few enough to linger in her memory. "Amakawa is an unfamiliar word to me. Would you explain why you chose this family name and what meaning it has?" King Francois asked Rio.

"It is a word used in the homeland of my departed parents, or so my mother told me when I was young. I do not know the meaning behind the word, but it is like a memento to me, which is why I thought to make it my family name," Rio replied smoothly.

Out of those present in the audience hall, the only ones who knew that Rio had a past life were Miharu and Satsuki, as well as Liselotte, who was informed in order for them to attend the banquet. Her eyes widened slightly when Rio suddenly said the name "Haruto Amakawa" out loud, but she watched the situation carefully with her attention on the man in question.

The other heroes had contemplative looks on their faces, but they didn't seem to find it fishy. The royalty and nobility attending didn't have any particular doubts either.

"I see, a memento of your parents... Very well. I, Francois, give it my approval. There will be no overturning this rule later. Do you have any objections?"

"Of course not. It would be my greatest delight." Rio lowered his head respectfully.

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“Then, henceforth, you are the Black Knight, Haruto Amakawa. We were interrupted by scoundrels last night, but thanks to Haruto and Shigekura’s efforts, not a single life was lost. Security has been increased and the third night of the banquet will commence. I shall formally announce the appointment of our new honorary knight there. Look forward to it, everyone,” Francois said with a broad smile.

“Yes, Your Majesty…” Rio nodded as celebratory applause rang through the room at the birth of a new honorary knight. Though there were some people among them, including the heroes, who had different expressions on their faces.

“With this, the audience is dismissed. You may leave.” Francois stood. His next schedule must have been approaching, as he walked off quickly. Meanwhile, the royalty and nobility present stirred as they hesitated to approach Rio.

“Haruto.” Satsuki came up to Rio first, Miharu in tow by the hand.

“Perfect timing. There was something I wanted to talk to you two about.” Rio replied to them with a soft but heavy expression.

“That’s fine, but…” Satsuki nodded, eyeing Miharu. Miharu was staring at Rio’s face.

“I’ll tell you everything. Including everything I have kept from Miharu until now.” Even after announcing the name Haruto Amakawa, Rio interacted with Miharu as the person she knew now. However, there was the possibility this was due to the people around them watching them.

“…Okay,” Miharu nodded slowly. That was when Miharu and Satsuki’s friend, Takahisa, came running over. Right behind him was the Centostella Kingdom’s First Princess, Lilianna.

“Miharu, Satsuki.”

“Sorry, Takahisa. We have something to discuss with Haruto,” Satsuki said to Takahisa apologetically.

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“Then I’ll come, too!” Takahisa invited himself in a fluster.

“Sorry. It’s something important,” Miharu said clearly, so that Takahisa would back down.

“…O-Okay.” Miharu’s rejection must have been unexpected for Takahisa, as he lost his spirit and nodded. It was as if he had been told, “I don’t have time to deal with you right now, Takahisa.”

“I’m really sorry. We’ll try to finish up as quickly as possible and make time to talk to you too. Let’s go, Haruto, Miharu.” Satsuki urged them into moving before anyone else stopped them to talk, and the three of them departed.

“Uh…” Takahisa clenched his fist. He watched Rio leave sandwiched between Miharu and Satsuki as everyone else around them looked on. If they were back in Japan, he would have been the one in Rio’s place…

There was another hero who was watching Rio depart too —it was Shigekura Rui of the Beltrum Kingdom. Beside him stood the first princess, Christina Beltrum. “Are you sure, hero? It seemed like you had something to say,” Christina asked him.

“There was just something I wanted to ask. I’ll talk to him next time I see him. They seemed to be rather busy,” Rui answered with a shrug.

“Hmph, I can’t even tell who the star of this banquet is anymore,” Restoration’s hero, Sakata Hiroaki, snorted with distaste as he watched how Rio was flanked by Satsuki and Miharu. Next to Hiroaki stood the Beltrum Kingdom’s Second Princess Flora and Roanna of Duke Fontaine’s house.

Flora was watching Rio’s back with a frustrated look. Her older sister, Christina, secretly watched her.

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After Rio and the girls left the hall, they headed for

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Satsuki's quarters.

"...Hey, is 'Amakawa' your family name from your past life?" Satsuki questioned Rio on the way there with an inquisitive look.

"Yes, I was a university student named Amakawa Haruto. Miharu, do you remember a person named Amakawa Haruto?"

"...Yeah." Instead of replying loud and clear, Miharu nodded. Rio's eyes widened faintly at that, which Satsuki seemed to notice as she looked at them questioningly.

"What do you mean...? Did you two know each other before?" she asked, tilting her head.

"...I'll tell you after we arrive. It would be troublesome if anyone overheard and there are a couple of shocking truths involved, so you should prepare yourselves as we walk." Rio thought for a moment, but prioritized relocating first.

"Prepare ourselves for what..." Satsuki tried to exchange looks with Miharu, but Miharu's nervous gaze was fixed on Rio's back as he walked in front of them. Sensing the strange air hanging between the two of them, Satsuki tactfully decided to keep quiet until they reached her quarters.

Thus, after they relocated, the three of them sat down in the living room with Rio facing Miharu and Satsuki.

"Here we are. I've prepared myself as much as I can, so explain just what is going on here. Why does Miharu know your past life? This is the first I'm hearing of such a thing," Satsuki began immediately, pressing Rio for details.

"Of course it would be. I've yet to tell her that I was Amakawa Haruto in my past life myself," Rio answered, looking at Miharu.

"Wait, really? But Miharu didn't seem that shocked, though she was shaken... If anything, she looked nervous instead?" Satsuki directed her gaze at Miharu.

"Ah, umm... I'm shocked, of course," Miharu said, flinching back.

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“But like, you knew each other, right? If someone you knew died without you knowing and lived together with you in their reincarnated form… Wouldn’t you be more surprised? It’s like you already knew, or at least suspected as much…” Satsuki stared at Miharu, her gaze sharp.

“T-That’s why I said I’m shocked. I’m shocked, but his name is the same as Haru-kun’s, so I had made the association before…” Miharu answered falteringly, her eyes never leaving Rio.

“Haru-kun?” asked Satsuki. It was a rather intimate nickname for another person.

“Ah, umm, it’s how I called him in the past…” Miharu felt highly aware of Rio as she explained herself to Satsuki. Satsuki hummed in response and looked at Rio, who was awkwardly avoiding meeting either of their gazes.

“…This is a pretty basic question, but what kind of relationship did Amakawa Haruto have with you? It seems like the two of you used to be fairly close, from what I can tell,” Satsuki asked, watching the two of them questioningly.

Rio took a deep breath before speaking up. “Miharu and I were childhood friends. On top of that, Aki and I were siblings who lived together with her up until our parents divorced and I moved away. Miharu and I were seven years old.”

“Miharu’s childhood friend… and Aki’s brother?! Huh? But… Huh? Wait, why?! And how could you both be seven years old? Aren’t you older than Miharu?” Satsuki asked, extremely confused.

“That’s why I told you I had some shocking things to say, so I hope you prepared yourself on the way here. Miharu and my past self were indeed the same age.” Rio smiled bitterly at the reaction he had seen coming.

“Is that true, Miharu?” Satsuki gulped.

“Yes. Haru-kun was my childhood friend and Aki’s older brother. We were the same age.” Miharu nodded slowly,

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watching Rio.

“Everything seems so confusing… But isn’t there something wrong with the timelines there?” Satsuki wanted to clutch her head and groan.

“There is something strange, yes. But my past self definitely died in university, and I regained Amakawa Haruto’s memories in this world when I was seven years old. In other words, Amakawa Haruto died in Japan four years after Miharu and you wandered into this world, but the current me in this world regained Amakawa Haruto’s memories nine years ago.”

“…Which means you’ve lived roughly thirteen years longer than we have, doesn’t it? We only arrived in this world a few months ago,” Satsuki said, breaking down Rio’s words to understand them.

“I wouldn’t exactly say that I’ve lived thirteen more years, to be precise. The current me simply shares Amakawa Haruto’s memories and personality. There shouldn’t be a strict continuity or identity shared between the two.”

“What do you mean?”

“The current me doesn’t use Amakawa Haruto as a foundation for my being. I am simply Rio, as I was born and raised as such up until the age of seven,” Rio declared.

“Rio…?”

“It’s my name in this world. I’ve had to move under the name of Haruto due to certain circumstances, but my real name is Rio,” Rio informed Satsuki.

“I see…”

“Yes. That is why I generally do not tell anyone my real name, so please call me Haruto.”

“Got it. But what did you mean by there being no strict identity…?” Satsuki asked, watching Rio’s face.

“It’s as I explained just now. This body purely belongs to Rio, and not Amakawa Haruto. It’s not as if Amakawa Haruto’s mind overwrote the person that Rio used to be. It’s

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more like the remnants of Amakawa Haruto's memories and personality blended into that of the person called Rio. You wouldn't call that being the same person as Amakawa Haruto, right?"

"That… might be true… But are you okay like that?"

"I can no longer become Amakawa Haruto. And there's no definitive proof that the memories and personality of Amakawa Haruto within me are truly what they seem," Rio said, scoffing at himself somewhat dejectedly. Seeing that expression on Rio's face made Miharu bite her lip with a sorrowful expression.

"True, there's only a subjective connection, which makes things rather vague, but…" Satsuki said with a pout on her lips, not quite accepting those words.

"Let's not discuss that part any further, as it is all theoretical in the end," Rio said, bringing them back to the topic at hand before it derailed. "What I really wanted to tell you was the reason why I stayed silent about my past life until now: to put it broadly, it's because I didn't want Miharu and the others to be even more disoriented after they'd just arrived in this world."

"…Well, I can agree that it would be even more confusing to be told such a thing immediately after being summoned here out of the blue," Satsuki agreed with a sigh, having experienced it first-hand.

"On top of that, there's more information I haven't mentioned," Rio said with an exceedingly serious expression. Satsuki stiffened.

"…What is it?"

"Roughly four and half years after you were all transported to this world, Amakawa Haruto died at the age of twenty-one—and at no point during that time had Miharu returned to Earth."

"Huh…?" Satsuki blinked blankly, her eyes round as she stared at him. Meanwhile, Miharu frowned in frustration,

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having received that information from Aishia already.

“My past self, Amakawa Haruto, used his high school entrance as a chance to move back to the town he grew up in. In order to attend the same high school as you two. That’s why I saw the commotion that occurred when you all disappeared on the day of the entrance ceremony first-hand,” Rio explained calmly.

“B-But how would you know? That we hadn’t returned to Japan yet,” Satsuki asked, growing slightly more panicked.

“In the three years until my graduation, Miharu never returned to school. After I graduated high school and became an adult, I went back to visit my mother just once. That was when I asked if Miharu was still missing.”

“S-So… ah…” Satsuki tried to ask something, opening and closing her mouth. Once she calmed herself down enough, she forced her question out. “So in other words, we won’t be able to return to Earth for over four years—or possibly longer?”

“That’s right. However, when I asked my mother about Aki, I recall her saying she was doing well… I imagine either my mother lied to keep me from worrying or Aki managed to return alone somehow, but there is no way for me to confirm the truth now,” Rio said, recalling the faint memory of his conversation with his mother.

If Aki had truly managed to return, then Amakawa Haruto’s mother would have known that Aki had wandered to another world. In which case, she would have known that Miharu had also gone to that other world and informed Haruto.

However, it was such a preposterous story, there was the possibility that his mother didn’t believe Aki after her return and simply stayed silent.

“…” A contemplative silence fell over Satsuki and Miharu.

“At any rate, that was why I couldn’t reveal my past life to Miharu and the others. There are other reasons as well, but

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it didn't feel right to say something so depressing while they were still separated from you and Takahisa. So I was going to wait until some time had passed, or you had all reunited…" It was nothing more than a superficial reason. That was why Rio looked a little guilty.

"If you had told Miharu about your past life, you would have inevitably been telling us that we couldn't go home. I had the faint suspicion that we wouldn't be able to return before high school graduation, but hearing it for real certainly is hard to hear…" Satsuki had a bittersweet smile on her face.

"I think that's understandable. Miharu seems to be comparatively unshaken by all this, but there's no saying the same would apply for Aki or Masato." Rio said, looking at Miharu, who had continuously held her silence until now.

"Ah, no… umm. Especially in Aki's case, I think she would have become more unstable if you had told her this," Miharu said in a high-pitched voice.

Rio averted his eyes from Miharu and addressed the both of them. "…I apologize if it seemed like I was keeping you in the dark, but this is everything I've been concealing until now. All that's left is to decide how much of this should be passed on to Aki, Masato, and Takahisa, but I'd like to leave that decision to you two, as you both understand the situation the best."

"You say that, but… it's something they need to hear too. We have to tell Aki and Masato that Takahisa has been found, too, and inform Takahisa that the two of them are safe as well… I suppose we'll have to figure out the timing for that, maybe arrange some kind of meeting," Satsuki pondered worriedly.

"From what I heard at the banquet yesterday, Princess Lilianna is constantly by Takahisa's side. They share the same quarters, so it may be difficult to bring Takahisa to the stone house without her noticing." Miharu frowned.

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“The attack happened just last night, so the security around the castle is heightened,” Rio said. It would be a challenge to bring Takahisa out of his quarters under the watchful eye of Lilianna. The castle had guest rooms that were windowless in the name of security, so if they were in a room like that, they’d have to use the door. Even if they were to scout the area first, it would be a high risk with the increase in guards.

“…Which means the safest option might be to bring Aki and Masato to the castle before Takahisa returns to the Centostella Kingdom.” Satsuki thought for a moment, then presented a realistic approach. “But even if we eventually explain things to the king and Princess Lilianna, we need to confirm what Takahisa thinks.”

“Yes. Though, in order to do that, we’ll need to make an opportunity for you two to meet Takahisa without Princess Lilianna around.”

“The only one who’s in a position to do that would be me, the hero, huh?” Asking a foreign princess to dismiss themselves would only be permitted by someone with the rank of a king or equivalent—like a hero. Even as an honorary knight, Rio couldn’t do such a thing.

“Yes. We’ll need to rely on you for that, Satsuki. I’m not sure how long Takahisa will stay in this kingdom after the banquet, so preferably as soon as possible.”

“Got it. Leave it to me,” Satsuki nodded.

“In that case, we also need to know what kind of person Princess Lilianna is and what kind of relationship she has with Takahisa, if we’re going to tell Takahisa what he needs to know,” said Rio. If they knew what kind of person Lilianna was, they should be able to understand the character of her kingdom, to an extent.

“Out of us three, Miharu interacted with them the most at the banquet last night. What did you think?” Satsuki asked Miharu.

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“Umm, like Takahisa said, she’s a good person. She was a kind person with a soft demeanor. It seemed like Takahisa trusted her a fair amount.”

“I see. Well, there’s the possibility it’s an act to win over the hero, but that’s probably me being too paranoid.” Satsuki hummed at Miharu’s explanation.

“I don’t think it hurts to be as cautious as possible,” Rio chuckled at Satsuki.

“Yup. I’d like a bit more time to think. Everything was so sudden, I still haven’t processed it all… Still, I never imagined Haruto would be my underclassman in his past life!” Satsuki tried to perk up, shifting the topic to Rio.

“We may have even passed each other at the entrance ceremony,” Rio replied with a smile.

“Yeah, maybe. I was in charge of directing lost students in front of the notice board with the class rosters… Wait, maybe we actually met for real…? Haruto, Amakawa Haruto…” As Satsuki talked to Rio, a lost memory of the entrance ceremony resurfaced in her mind, making her gasp. She racked her brains to dig that memory out.

“Really?” Rio’s eyes widened. Even the quiet Miharu blinked her eyes wide open.

“Yeah. Weren’t you the boy that stood in front of the notice boards for a long time? I remember finding that odd and talking to you, and you had a name like that… I think. Do you remember?” Satsuki peered at Rio’s face, not too confident in her own memory.

“…I think there may have been an older student that came up to me while I was looking at the class lists? But I’m surprised you can remember.” Rio’s memory of it was rather vague.

“It was my last day on Earth, you know? Of course I’d remember. Well, it seems like you’ve completely forgotten it, though.” Satsuki looked at Rio scornfully.

“Don’t ask for the impossible. It’s only one of the many

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things that happened to me before my death," Rio said. After all, it had only happened to Satsuki a few months ago.

"I suppose that's true. But even if you were my underclassman on Earth, you're mentally older than me now. Should I think of you as an adult man?" Satsuki asked, having assumed that he was a boy of similar age to her until now.

Rio shook his head in discomfort at the thought of Satsuki treating him differently. "You can just continue as you have been. Like I said before, if I'm not particularly focusing on anything, then my awareness as Rio is stronger. That's why I have a stronger sense of my physical age. Perhaps I'm being influenced by the feeling of my physical body."

"...Okay. Then let's continue to get along as we have been, Haruto."

"Right."

"So, it's been all me talking until now..." Satsuki said, glancing at Miharu sitting beside her. Miharu had been staring silently at Rio's face for a while now.

"Did you have anything you wanted to talk to Haruto about?" Satsuki asked. Despite having a boy with her childhood friend's memories before her, Miharu was oddly silent about it all.

"Ah, umm... I do, but I don't know where to begin." Miharu seemed nervous as she stumbled over her words.

"There were things I wanted to discuss with Miharu alone, actually. I'd love to include you in further discussions later, after we're done. Could I ask that you take some time to think over the things we've discussed so far?" Rio spoke up first.

"...Sure. All right—I'll be in my bedroom, then." Satsuki looked between Rio and Miharu's faces, then stood up quietly. She was a little curious about what they were going to discuss, but she considerately headed to her bedroom to leave them to it. Once her door clicked shut, Rio opened his

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mouth.

“Miharu.”

“Y-Yes,” Miharu squeaked in reply.

“Did you think I was Amakawa Haruto for some time now?” Rio stared directly at Miharu as he asked.

“Rather than thinking you were, I was more wondering if you could be, since… Well, you had the same name and gave off a similar feeling, so as we lived together I started… remembering Haru-kun…”

“Was that all…?” Rio’s eyes widened at Miharu’s words.

“Actually, back at the spirit folk village, Sara and the others mentioned something… About when Haru-kun and Latifa first wandered into the village. That when you were unconscious in the jail, you muttered Mii-chan…” Miharu seemed to find her resolution, calling Rio “Haru-kun” right to his face.

“…I did?” He had no idea that had happened—he had been unconscious, after all. Rio frowned.

“After that, I started wondering if you really were Haru-kun after all,” Miharu said, squeezing her right hand into a fist over her chest.

“But, thinking about it realistically, wouldn’t you find it impossible to believe? I told you I died as a university student in my past life, right? Although I suppose that wouldn’t have mattered if you suspected I was lying.”

“I never thought you were lying! It’s true that I thought the story was inconsistent… But even then, when you returned to the village, I started to get the strong feeling that you might be Haru-kun…”

“…So that’s why you were acting strange when I returned to the village. And when I brought you to Liselotte’s mansion in Amande for the first time too.” Rio had a somewhat pained face, but understood. However, he also had a strange feeling about it—he could accept that there was a reason for her awareness, but even then, Miharu had accepted the truth

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too readily. It was almost as though she had received a hint from someone.

On top of that, Miharu hadn't seemed particularly surprised at anything Rio had revealed until now. In other words, she had been almost certain that he was Amakawa Haruto.

If she was practically certain of her suspicions, why didn't she ask me before I told her the truth? Was there a reason for her silence, just like there was a reason for mine? With such questions in mind, Rio looked back on the events that had occurred with Miharu up until this banquet.

Now that I think about it, the day after I brought Miharu to Liselotte's estate to arrange attendance to the banquet, she started acting differently again… Rio analyzed in his head as he stared at Miharu.

"W-What is it, Haru-kun?" Miharu asked timidly, feeling as though Rio could see right through her.

"…Miharu," Rio sighed.

"…Yes?" she asked, looking at him worriedly.

"Can you please stop calling me Haru-kun?" Rio said with a troubled expression.

"…Why?" Miharu frowned quite sadly.

"As I've explained already, Amakawa Haruto is dead. The current me is not your childhood friend. I am a different person who merely possesses his memories. So you don't need to force yourself into interacting with me as though I am Amakawa Haruto." Rio feigned composure as he forced out words that were extremely difficult to say.

"There's no way I can think of you as a different person!" Miharu immediately—and unexpectedly—raised her voice, for once.

"…" Rio was overwhelmed into silence.

"If the person in front of me right now isn't Haru-kun, then where did the Haru-kun I know go?"

"He no longer exists. At the very least, not on Earth. The

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remnants of his memories and personality have simply blended into the person before you right now. But my body is that of Rio, and not of Amakawa Haruto.” There was only the subjective connection of memories and personality, but nothing objectively connected at all.

“...Then I believe Haru-kun is still here. Right now, inside of you,” Miharu stared at Rio’s face and declared.

“I’d like to confirm something. Do you see me as your childhood friend right now? Am I, the person named Rio, who interacted with you under the name of Haruto, present at all?”

“That’s...” She wasn’t able to answer immediately. Indeed, Miharu was currently trying to see Rio as her childhood friend. She sought Amakawa Haruto from Rio himself. “I didn’t mean to make light of you, Haruto. But having lived with you until now, there were several occasions where I recalled the days when I was with Haru-kun. I simply can’t believe that Haru-kun isn’t within you. That’s all,” Miharu continued.

“I believe that’s because you don’t know the side of me that’s Rio.” If she knew, she’d be terrified. She’d have to accept that Rio and Amakawa Haruto were different people. That’s why he had hidden it until now. He couldn’t make up his mind. Rio reflected on himself and smiled regretfully.

“So... So please tell me, then. About who Haruto— No, who Rio is. Don’t make the decision for me. I want to be with you from here on out as well. That’s what I said to you, right? My feelings haven’t changed.”

“...Why do you want to be with me?”

“After growing up with Haru-kun until the age of seven, when Rio and Haru-kun started to overlap with each other in this world it made me realize just how precious Haru-kun was to me. Those feelings of mine only grew stronger. Someone so precious to me died, but now that person is back before me in another form. Living together with me

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and everything. It's like I was given another chance. That's why I want to stay with you."

"...I'm happy to hear you say that. But if you hadn't felt Amakawa Haruto's presence within me, would you still have wanted to stay with me?"

"Asking in that way is unfair. It's true that my reason for wanting to be with you might be heavily influenced by how I think of you as my childhood friend, Haru-kun, but..." Miharu said with a frown.

"Sorry. Miharu... Mii-chan was someone precious to Amakawa Haruto as well. That didn't change even after he grew up. It may sound foolish, but he chose to move back to that town alone, just for a chance to see you again at that high school. Well, there was no way of knowing you'd attend that high school for sure, but..." Rio explained, speaking about the feelings of Amakawa Haruto within him truthfully.

"Ah..." Hearing the name Mii-chan brought back so many memories, Miharu couldn't help but tear up. But, as Rio continued to speak, her face gradually twisted with sadness instead.

"That's why it's important that you know that Amakawa Haruto is dead. If you want to be with me in order to be with him, then it may be better to rethink that."

"...Why?"

"Because I cannot interact with you as Amakawa Haruto. Even if aspects of him remain, he's a different person. The person who played with you every day until the age of seven —the person who made that promise with you when you separated—no longer exists. You'll realize that if you stay with me, and you may come to regret it." By surviving in this cold-hearted world, by becoming a prisoner of the shackles of revenge, Amakawa Haruto's values within Rio had weakened significantly.

It wasn't meant to be like this. Amakawa Haruto had changed. No, Miharu would eventually become

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disillusioned, realizing that Amakawa Haruto had truly died.

That's why they were better off apart to begin with, Rio thought.

"...Even then, my feelings won't change," Miharu stated firmly, biting her lip.

"Even if the impression you have of me is far from what I am in reality?" Rio said in a self-mocking tone.

"Just now, I could feel traces of Haru-kun." Miharu didn't back down.

"And yet, before I regained my memories, I would do anything criminals asked of me just to survive another day. That's the kind of person I am. Can you still say the same then? Is that the Amakawa Haruto you once knew?" Rio's gaze was icy as he spoke.

"T-That's before you regained your memories, so..."

"Whether I did them before or after my memories don't change the fact that they're still things I did. It's not as though I conveniently became another person and erased my sins."

"Uh..." Miharu held her tongue.

"That's what it means. Even after regaining my memories, I didn't live in a way anyone could be proud of. I've beaten someone up out of anger, to the point they lost consciousness. I've killed people in retaliation for being attacked. I'm trying to kill a man out of vengeance for my mother." Rio indifferently listed his actions that fell out of line with the morals of an ordinary Japanese person.

"Ah... uh..." Miharu tried to say something, but was ultimately rendered speechless.

"Of course, it's your decision, Miharu. If you wish to continue living in the stone house, I won't stop you. But you should think about it very carefully. The person I want dead knows what I'm trying to do. If you stay with me, you might be dragged into it, too. I want to avoid that. And, as far as Aki and Masato are concerned... both of them adore you so

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much—especially Aki. Anyone can see that. There's Takahisa, too. Rather than staying with me, wouldn't you be happier if you stayed with everyone you know from Earth?" Rio asked, bringing up the others in order to try and dissuade Miharu.

"You can't just decide my fate like that... But it is true that Aki and the others aren't unrelated to this." Miharu frowned in frustration.

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“Let’s set aside the matter of who you should be with for a moment. It’s not a problem that can be solved right now, and I want to talk more about Aki too. Let me be frank: Aki hates Haruto, doesn’t she? That’s the feeling I got when I saw her reaction to my name when we met, and on a few occasions when we’ve interacted…”

Miharu was silent for a moment, but eventually put her feelings to the side and nodded slowly. “…Yes, she does.”

“I think Aki should hear about my past life as Haruto from me directly, but I was hoping to hear your thoughts about how Aki would react and why she feels such hatred for Haruto in the first place,” Rio said.

“Haru… Rio.” Miharu was about to call him Haru-kun, or perhaps Haruto, before correcting herself.

“You can continue to call me Haruto. It’d be a problem if someone heard me being called Rio.” Rio averted his eyes awkwardly.

“Haruto, how much do you know about what happened to Aki after your parents divorced?”

“Practically nothing. My father made sure I knew nothing about my mother until I turned twenty. The one time I met my mother after I turned twenty, I asked about Aki and was told she was doing well, so I never imagined she’d appeared in this world alongside you.”

“I… see. Aki gets really emotional when it comes to the topic of her father and Haru-kun. One time, I made her really angry about it and she ended up in tears… I’ve avoided talking about Haru-kun in front of Aki ever since. That’s why… this is only my assumption, but…”

“Will you tell me anyway?” Rio asked, watching Miharu.

“Aki really loved Haru-kun and her father… So I think she was really sad and lonely when the two of them moved away so suddenly, without any explanation. She was only four back then, so she didn’t understand why they’d left. It must have hurt so much waiting for two people who never

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returned…” Miharu said with a frown.

“I see…” Rio processed her words with a quiet expression. However, if she had only been sad, that didn’t explain why she felt so much unfounded anger towards Haruto.

“Also, at the time, Yuki… your mother also struggled with the divorce a lot, and work didn’t seem to be going smoothly for her, so she ended up falling ill. Aki was upset that you two didn’t return even after that, which gradually turned into anger…” Miharu added, explaining why Aki’s anger had manifested. Yuki was Aki and Haruto’s mother.

“…Does Aki know why our parents divorced now?” Rio asked after a moment of hesitation.

“Sorry, I don’t know. The topic of the divorce has become taboo with her,” Miharu shook her head apologetically.

“I see… But it’s possible she hasn’t been told,” said Rio.

“How can you tell?” Miharu asked with wide eyes.

“…I only heard from my father after I grew up, but they divorced because of my mother’s infidelity. Aki isn’t my father’s daughter,” Rio said rather uncomfortably. He had hesitated telling Miharu, but ultimately decided it was better for her to be informed.

“Huh…?” Miharu fell speechless, eyes wide with shock.

“Haruto and Aki were actually half-siblings. That’s why my father was so enraged that they divorced. I don’t think my mother would have told that to Aki directly, though.” The fault lay on the one who had been cheating, but Aki was born as a result. Aki could possibly end up blaming herself for her parents’ divorce, so at the very least, it wasn’t something that Aki could have been told during her younger years.

“…U-Umm, I think Aki knows that the anger she feels for Haru-kun is baseless and illogical. She just can’t control her emotions well, so… I’m sorry.” Miharu seemed to feel somewhat responsible, as she hung her head gloomily.

“Why are you apologizing? It’s not something even Aki should be apologizing for,” Rio said with a forced smile.

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“I’ve been acting like Aki’s older sister, yet I couldn’t do anything more than watch everything unfold…” She had avoided the topic of Haruto out of fear of ruining her relationship with Aki—out of fear of making Aki even angrier. Miharu felt guilty.

“I’m not one to talk, having memories of Haruto, who never did anything relatively brotherly. But if I had been in your place, I would have only been able to watch as well. Thank you. For being beside Aki, in place of the brother that left her.” Rio’s Haruto side showed through strongly as he thanked Miharu.

“…” Seeing that face on him made Miharu grimace with sadness. For a moment, Rio’s appearance overlapped with that of the grown up Haruto she’d seen in her dream.

Moments like this was why Miharu couldn’t help but overlap Rio with Haruto. The person in question insisted they were different people, but Miharu still hadn’t accepted that completely. But the things Rio had explained couldn’t be dismissed outright as being incorrect, which made it worse.

“Is something the matter?” Rio peered at Miharu’s face and cocked his head in question.

“No… it’s nothing.” Miharu stifled the emotions she had yet to process and shook her head with a forced smile.

“I was hoping you could sit in when I tell Aki about my past life. If her reaction is particularly strong, you may need to step in…”

“Of course. But let me think a little longer about what would be the best way to tell her.”

“Sure. I don’t mind if you discuss with Satsuki about how much of what we’ve discussed now should be revealed, and to whom. Please organize your thoughts,” Rio said, looking a little sad. After that, Miharu headed for Satsuki’s room so that the two of them could talk for a while.

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Meanwhile, in King Francois' office, Prince Michel had brought his sister, Charlotte—or rather, she had followed of her own accord—to somewhat forcefully request an audience with their father.

Michel entered the room with permission and sat down in a chair in the office. "If I may be so forward, Father, what were you thinking?" he asked with a displeased expression.

"My priority is the kingdom's well-being," Francois replied flatly, eyes not leaving the documents he was looking at. Michel shrank back at that.

"What… are you saying?"

"I could ask you the same. What are you trying to say?" Francois finally raised his head, looking directly at his son.

"I-I simply stated that I cannot understand the reason why you would give that man of unknown background the title of an honorable knight, Father," Michel admonished, his voice strangely high-pitched.

"It should be obvious. It was for the benefit of the kingdom," Francois said frankly.

"…I cannot understand it at all. Though it may be a modern title, an honorable knight has the same social position as a count! While our customs do allow people of foreign nationality to be given status, that is a tradition assumed for nobles of our kingdom when they marry into a foreign kingdom. It's unheard of for a vagabond who isn't even nobility to be bestowed such a thing. You could have just given him money or goods. And on top of that, you let him stay multiple nights in Satsuki's quarters…" Michel grimaced.

"Mm," Francois scoffed in amusement.

"W-What's so funny?"

"Michel. I waited for you for several months—to see if you could make Satsuki fall for you. But the result was clear: you

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couldn't. Day by day, Satsuki's mind was closing off more and more and focusing only towards the outside world. That is why I went ahead with the banquet."

"...To help find Satsuki's friends and regain her good graces?" Michel asked with a sullen face.

"That is another reason. But that was only the short-term goal. If we were to look at it from a long-term perspective, it would be more precise to say it was in order to tie Satsuki down to our kingdom. And if she cannot be tied with romance, then we simply have to explore the other options. The banquet was ideal for that."

"Should it not be our duty as royalty to secure the hero to the kingdom?"

"That's why I waited for you. For several months, at that. Satsuki is a woman with sharp senses. How do you think she would react if I supplied her with other royalty besides you at this point?"

"B-But we'd also have a problem if all her attention is directed elsewhere. Even if he is the savior of Satsuki's good friend, I cannot understand the purpose of letting an unknown commoner get so close. If that were to be the case, then I..."

"Mmm. Are you against the idea of Satsuki growing close to men other than you, Michel?" Francois scoffed once more, watching his son's face.

"Wha...?!" Michel turned red, as he scrambled for words.

"I believe I ordered you to catch Satsuki's attention and earn her trust... but instead of making her fall for you, you ended up falling for her instead. How adorable," Francois chuckled.

"T-That's not true!"

"Did you think you could fool me? Your thoughts are perfectly clear to me. The fact that Satsuki isn't drawn to you at all is, too. But you are aware of that yourself, no?"

"Ugh..." Michel was unable to refute that.

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“A hero is a symbol of religious belief, but at the same time they are an extremely powerful political stimulant. Thus, integrating the hero into the kingdom’s politics smoothly can produce wonderful effects, but doing so improperly can bring the kingdom chaos. You are more than aware of this too, no?”

“…Yes,” Michel nodded sternly.

“A successful marriage is one way of tackling this in a way that can give the greatest results, but the other side is a hero. It would be absolutely forbidden to force her into an undesired political marriage like any other daughter of royalty or nobility. More than anything, Satsuki herself doesn’t seem to accept the concept of political marriages that ignore the will of the people involved. It is more desirable to have Satsuki align herself with our kingdom on her own,” Francois said, while thinking.

Well, it would have been a different matter if Satsuki had been a man, Francois thought. “If there’s no hope for you, back away before you’re shunned. A man who cannot give up will be hated, understand? I’m sure you’ve realized what kind of person Satsuki is from these last few months,” Francois added, taking a stab at Michel’s pride.

“Ugh… I-I am aware.” Michel seemed to calm down a little at those words, swallowing his emotions as he nodded.

“That is good to hear. Having said this much, I’m sure you understand that my actions until now were made with the purpose of keeping Satsuki within this kingdom by way of her own will?”

“Of course, I have no objections to that goal.”

“But you don’t approve of the means, hmm? Though you understand this much, you still seem to place too much emphasis on social statuses. Heroes are disciples who embody the might of the Six Wise Gods. For us, people who maintain power through that might, their existences are far outside the standard. It would be the poorest plan of action

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to forcefully control them. The norms aren't always the correct answer. If there is an effective way to entrap Satsuki, then you need to throw away your preexisting notions and values and use those methods aggressively."

"So that's why you orchestrated the banquet and the resulting appearance of Miharu and Takahisa… as well as Haruto, Father?" When Michel said the name Haruto, his face twitched slightly.

"That's right," Francois replied immediately.

"However, I do not understand what the connection is between keeping Satsuki within this kingdom and having Haruto stay in Satsuki's rooms, going as far as to give him the title of an honorary knight. Wouldn't it have been enough to keep Miharu here too?" Michel asked.

"Miharu appeared from the same world as Satsuki. Though she isn't a hero, Miharu has a longstanding relationship with her. But that doesn't mean we can deem her to be unrelated to the Six Wise Gods and treat her lightly, no? Because that would only upset Satsuki."

"So that's why you focused on Haruto…"

"Haruto was of remarkable character to begin with. Even without his relationship with Satsuki factored in, it would have been difficult to pass that up. It seems like Satsuki has also taken a fair liking to Haruto, too. Isn't that right, Charlotte?" It was at this point that Francois finally addressed Charlotte, who had been listening in silence.

"Yes, Lady Satsuki has been a different person these last few days. Of course, while reuniting Lady Miharu played a part of it, I believe it is undeniable that Sir Haruto had an effect too. Lady Satsuki herself has said he was like a friend of many years, and while it was canceled due to the intrusion, she wasn't against the idea of a dance with him." Charlotte happily reported on the things she'd observed carefully from Satsuki during the banquet.

"There you have it." Francois smiled with delight.

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“…I understand.” Michel finally accepted this, nodding as the strength drained from his shoulders.

“Good. Be open-minded, Michel. If you show the composure to support Haruto, you may even get Satsuki to change the way she sees you,” Francois said with a grin. Michel’s face turned red.

“W-What are you saying?!”

“Ha. The situation is growing more complicated right now, but I don’t intend on stopping your actions as long as you act within your status. If you notice anything about Satsuki in the future, continue to report to me.”

“Y-Yes, I understand. I shall excuse myself now. Let’s go, Charlotte.” Michel nodded with a strained voice, before turning and leaving with Charlotte.

“No, Charlotte—you stay. I have something I wish to discuss. You may leave, Michel.”

“…I understand. See you later, then, Charlotte.” Michel nodded before departing. He was a little curious as to what Francois had to talk to Charlotte about, but he could always ask her later.

Thus, father and daughter were left alone. “Wonderfully handled as always, Father. You understand how to mobilize my brother perfectly. The way you worded it leaves him no choice but to accept Sir Haruto,” Charlotte said with a giggle.

“He lacks the flexible thinking that comes with more experience. As long as he is shown the right way, he is able to think logically.”

“I shall follow your example.”

“Hah, you jest.” Francois smiled smugly.

“So does the reason why you called me back have something to do with Lady Satsuki after all? I reported to you last night about the relationships surrounding Lady Satsuki.” She was referring to Miharu and Haruto, of course, but also Takahisa, who had joined them as of last night.

“This is a result of my thoughts about that report. If

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someone as cautious as Satsuki could open her heart to Haruto so rapidly, then we simply must make use of that connection. The once-deadlocked political situation has finally begun to move. Even though the hardheaded nobles will surely disapprove…”

“So that was what the title of a new honorary knight was for,” Charlotte said with a knowing look.

“With such notable achievements, those stubborn fools won’t be able to object. Though he was building upon his existing feats, Haruto showed us just how splendid his military exploits are at the banquet.” Francois grinned. In other words, his goal was to use Haruto as the intermediary connecting Satsuki to the Galarc Kingdom.

“Yes. Then am I right in assuming my role from here on out is to indirectly push Lady Satsuki toward Sir Haruto, consequently forming a connection of trust with our kingdom?” Charlotte beamed happily.

“That is correct. However, it is Satsuki you are dealing with. Hasty actions will only trigger her to become cautious. Restrain your actions only to what is natural, so that she moves freely of her own will. I shall leave the method to you.”

“Oh?” Charlotte’s eyes sparkled even brighter at that.

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“I wouldn’t leave this in the hands of someone like Michel, who values tradition and status. Well… in contrast, you have a tendency to be *too* flexible… But I acknowledge that you are the most capable. And you have gained Satsuki’s trust to a certain degree.”

“I’m honored by your words. There’s just one thing I’d like to ask about this role, Father. Just how close of a relationship do you want Lady Satsuki and Sir Haruto to have? Until they exchange vows?” She was speaking of marriage vows, of course. Charlotte seemed to enjoy asking the question, as though she knew the answer already.

With no hope for Michel at all, the other option would be… to have Haruto placed under the influence of our kingdom by tying him with Satsuki, then eventually marrying their child with our royalty… The thought briefly crossed Francois’ mind.

“We shall wait and see. There’s no guarantee that Satsuki will feel that way. Continue observing their relationship and report immediately if anything changes. I will give you instructions to have the best outcome for our political situation,” he ordered Charlotte.

“I understand. The relationship between Lady Miharu, Sir Takahisa, and Princess Lilianna may be fortuitous to us, so it would be one possibility to approach it that way. Which means… My oh my, whatever shall I do? There’s so much to think about,” Charlotte said, smiling happily. Francois watched his daughter with slightly exasperated eyes, but smiled as he considered their plans for the future.

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Roughly one hour later, in a different location…

The Centostella Kingdom guests, Takahisa and Lilianna, resided in the living room of the guest quarters of the Galarc royal castle.

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“Do you think Miharu and Satsuki are still talking to him?” Takahisa was pacing around the room restlessly as Lilianna was seated on a sofa. It wasn’t a question Lilianna would know the answer to, but he was probably aware of that and asked anyway.

“If they haven’t arrived to see you yet, that is most likely the case, Sir Takahisa,” Lilianna replied in a calm voice.

“Right, of course…” Takahisa slumped into the sofa heavily and began shaking his leg restlessly instead. Seeing him like that made Lilianna speak up.

“Sir Takahisa, time will pass faster if you take a nap. You must be tired from all the traveling and attending the banquet these last few days, so how about you get some rest in your room? I’ll call you immediately if Lady Miharu and Lady Satsuki arrive.”

“R-Really?”

“Fatigue builds up without notice. If you lie down on your bed, you may find yourself asleep in a matter of moments, and it would be good to rest before the banquet tonight anyway,” Lilianna explained, persuading Takahisa for his own well-being.

“Right. Okay… Then I’ll do just that.” Takahisa smiled weakly and stood up with a soft sigh. He was probably aware of his own restlessness. Lying down was a good suggestion, and he could at least use the time to calm down a bit.

“Rest well.”

“Yeah. I’ll be back later.”

At that, Takahisa walked off. When the door to his bedroom clicked shut, Lilianna was left seated on the sofa, accompanied by her mid-teen attendant Frill, and Hilda, who was in charge of her guards.

“Hilda, can you ask Kiara to remain on guard outside the door and call Alice here?” Lilianna said.

“Understood.” Hilda bowed her head respectfully before heading outside the room. She opened the door and spoke to

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the two female knights who were on guard, calling the younger Alice inside.

“Did you summon me, Princess Lilianna?” Alice tilted her head and asked in a slow voice that still held a touch of innocence to it. She was fourteen, which was slightly young to be a knight guarding a member of the royal family, even when compared to Kiara, who was seventeen. This was partially because many young female knights retired for marriage, and partially because of Alice’s special talents. Those talents were what had made her enlist as a knight, even though she was the daughter of a duke.

“Alice, you said there was a tremendous amount of magic essence naturally flowing out of Sir Amakawa’s body at the banquet last night, correct? Just how much is that?” asked Lilianna. Indeed, despite the fact that Alice was a human living in the Strahl region, she could visualize magic essence. This ability had awakened in her when she was twelve years old, upon which she had been scouted to guard the first princess.

“Hmm… Around the same amount as our hero, I believe? But, honestly speaking, I’m not certain. The amount of essence flowing from your body can be controlled, and he seemed to be able to do that extremely well, too. I’ve never seen anyone wrap themselves in magic essence so cleanly and efficiently before. It’s possible that he has less essence than our hero, but it’s also possible that he has more.” Alice pondered over her answer, tapping her fingers to her lips.

Humans who could use magic had varying levels at which they could detect and manipulate magic essence, but it was unheard of for people to go a step further and visualize essence. This was a required skill in order to use spirit arts, which made humans naturally unsuitable for learning spirit arts.

Of course, it was possible to learn to visualize essence with enough practice over time, but unfortunately, the much

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easier-to-learn technique of magic had spread too far through the Strahl region, leaving no one with knowledge of spirit arts.

However, there were exceptions to this even among humans, and Alice was one such genius who had high compatibility towards spirit arts. Though she couldn't use spirit arts, she could utilize her ability to visualize magic essence to feel for its flow and protect her charge. Furthermore, she could tell how much magic essence a person had by seeing the naturally-emitted essence from their body.

For the record, in terms of perception and manipulation of magic essence required to use magic, Celia was overwhelmingly more talented, but in terms of visualizing essence alone, Alice was better than Celia. However, Celia had been learning to visualize magic essence during her time in the stone house, so that gap in ability was slowly closing.

"...Is it even possible to have more magic essence than our hero? He possesses more magic essence than all of our royal sorcerers combined, right?" Hilda asked with a dubious face, finding it hard to believe.

"That's why I said I wasn't certain. It may be more accurate to say that I can't see his limits. While it's true that the magic essence that flows out of a person's body is representative of their total essence amount, I can only make a very vague estimate. You can control the essence that flows out of you on a daily basis with enough practice, too. Think of it like being unable to tell the difference between a cup of water and a bucket of water," Alice said, shrugging her shoulders.

"Hilda, in your eyes, what were Sir Amakawa's abilities like?" Lilianna asked Hilda.

"...From what I could see of the battle, his skill is top-notch. The rumors said he defeated several minotaurs with his swordcraft and repelled a demi-dragon's breath with his

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enchanted blade, and I believe he has the abilities to support those claims," Hilda conjectured.

"In other words, at this point, Sir Amakawa is untouchable. After talking to Lady Miharu at the banquet last night and seeing his demeanor at the audience earlier, he seems to have a reserved personality, too," Lilianna summarized, then sighed somewhat listlessly.

"...Is there a problem with him?" Hilda asked, narrowing her eyes. As the head guard, if there was something to be suspicious of then she needed to be aware of all factors that could affect her duty.

"That's not what I meant," said Lilianna. But her expression still showed signs of worry.

There isn't a problem with Sir Amakawa himself. He's been the talk of the town, after all. Rumors about him have spread everywhere. Yet all of them only speak highly of him. If there was a problem, then...

It would be how Takahisa seemed to feel a sense of negativity toward Haruto. Every time rumors praising Haruto reached his ears, he would frown. That was because of the girl named Miharu, whom Lilianna knew Takahisa had feelings for.

Sir Takahisa is jealous of Sir Amakawa. Though I don't know how much awareness he has of that himself... Lilianna had wanted to ease the state of Takahisa's mind by letting him reunite with Satsuki, which was why she made this visit to Galarc a reality.

But now she worried that Takahisa's mental state had become even more unstable by coming here. Though, right now, it was still only a small seed of fear...

It's risky. Having such feelings of rivalry with a person as exceptional as him... It was generally impossible for a person to win out against someone else in all aspects, because each person had their own strong points and weak points.

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However, jealousy could cloud a person's eyes. There was no need for such a thing, yet they become disillusioned with the need to win over the other in every way. If they don't win, they feel unbearable anxiety.

What if Takahisa's jealousy was deeply ingrained? What if he perceived his loss against Haruto in areas he couldn't win in? It would be best to remove that seed of jealousy from Takahisa as soon as possible. By urging him to return to their kingdom immediately, to be precise. However—

...Even if I can foresee what will happen, I cannot ask Sir Takahisa as he is now to return to our kingdom. Even if she suggested their earlier return, Takahisa wouldn't agree.

Lilianna couldn't forcefully restrain Takahisa and bring him back to her kingdom; doing so would immediately damage his trust in her and cause him to turn against the kingdom.

I must move as Sir Takahisa desires. That is my duty as princess. But... It was also her duty to guide Takahisa down the correct path, as his support. With that thought, Lilianna quietly closed her eyes and steeled her determination.

At that moment, the door to the bedroom Takahisa went into to sleep opened. Of course, appearing in the doorway was the boy himself.

"Hey, Lily. They might be done with their conversation by now... Could we maybe go to Satsuki and Miharu's rooms to check?" Takahisa asked Lilianna with a terribly anxious face. At this very moment, his only ally was herself—that was the delusion Lilianna was struck by. She knew just how weak Takahisa was; how he was only just a boy, despite his title as hero.

Satsuki's name had been mentioned, but the one Takahisa wanted to see was Miharu. That much was easy to see...

Lilianna hesitated before answering. "...I cannot recommend it at this time."

"..." Takahisa hung his head despairingly, but the words

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Lilianna uttered next cheered him up.

“However, we can go and check if that is the case. If you can promise me we will leave promptly if they are still occupied, I shall accompany you. What do you think?”

“Let’s go!” His answer was immediate. The way his face changed made his thoughts so easy to read, he would have failed as a member of royalty or nobility. Takahisa was a type of person Lilianna had never interacted with, which was precisely why she didn’t know how to interact with him.

“Then let us go. You shall all accompany us.” Lilianna chuckled, prompting them all to begin moving. She could feel a thorn-like pain prickling her heart.

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Roughly one hour had passed since Rio had told Satsuki and Miharu about his past life and discussed what to do about the future.

Miharu finished discussing things alone with Satsuki and returned to Rio, then planned out their points of information for what was to come.

In other words, how much of the truth they could reveal to Takahisa, keeping in mind the presence of Centostella Kingdom’s Princess Lilianna, and how much about his past life as Amakawa Haruto should be shared with Aki and the members of the Sendo family.

“Miharu’s explained it all to me, but the bottleneck in telling the three Sendo family members the truth will be Aki, won’t it? She despises Haruto, but she doesn’t know about your past life yet… That makes everything complicated.” By putting the situation into words, Satsuki could feel how complex the issue was and smiled wryly.

“Sorry,” Rio said.

“I was unable to do anything out of fear my relationship with Aki would change, too…” Miharu hung her head

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apologetically.

“No, the two of you shouldn’t be apologizing, but… hmm…” Satsuki cocked her head, wondering what could be done. “…I believe Aki’s emotions are illogical, but if it was something that could be explained in words then it wouldn’t drag on for so long, you know? That’s why it was hard for Miharu to talk to Aki about it. If she revealed Haruto’s past life to Aki, she could have recoiled and twisted the conversation off-course.”

“…Yeah.” Miharu nodded bitterly.

“It’s just… if we tell them we won’t be returning to Earth for the next few years at least, we’ll inevitably need to tell them about Haruto’s past life. And Takahisa needs to know Aki and Masato are safe, and the reverse applies, too. It would be cruel to keep the truth of our return to Earth hidden. Hmm…” Satsuki organized the information she had received accurately and pondered. “Then, how about this? We don’t want the discussion to go off-topic, and there’s also the concerns about Princess Lilianna, so first we’ll tell Takahisa a little information as we can. Just that Aki and Masato are both safe. Then for Aki and Masato… Once Aki is aware that Takahisa has been found safe and sound, we’ll tell her about Haruto’s past life. Now that Haruto’s named himself with the last name Amakawa, Aki will realize the truth as soon as she arrives at the castle. Which would be too late.”

“…I have nothing to argue about there.” Rio placed a hand against his mouth and agreed with Satsuki. He thought it was the most reasonable plan in order to prevent the conversation from getting more complicated.

“Really? If you have any objections at all, speak up.”

“No, I believe that would be for the best. You’re very skilled at this, Satsuki.”

“Ahaha, I guess I was a leader before— Or rather, a student council rep. I tend to voice my opinions without

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hesitation during a discussion. And when it comes to Aki, I can provide an objective opinion as a third party, I guess. Well, what do you think, Miharu?" Satsuki said shyly, before turning to Miharu for her opinion.

"I don't have a problem with that, either." Miharu nodded.

"The only other problem would be whether or not it would be okay to bring Aki and Masato to the castle if the three of them agree to meet, I suppose? Do we have an answer for that?" Rio asked.

Satsuki exchanged a look with Miharu and nodded. "I discussed it with Miharu, and we think the only option is for them to meet at the castle—once they all agree to the risks involved."

"Got it. In that case, I'll leave the explanation for Takahisa to you two, and I'll sneak out of the castle tonight to explain things to Aki and Masato myself."

"Umm, I'll go, too," Miharu offered immediately.

"...Okay. Then we'll leave this place to Satsuki. If something happened to the security at the castle, someone might come here. It'd be bad if we were all missing."

"Gotcha. If someone ends up visiting, I'll do something about it. Don't worry," Satsuki agreed readily.

"Then we're counting on you." Rio nodded his head at Satsuki.

Aishia, can you go run an errand for me? Rio asked Aishia secretly.

Yeah, sure. Do you want me to go to Aki and Masato? Aishia must have been listening, as she replied immediately.

Yeah. I'd like you to go to the stone house first and inform them that Takahisa has been found. Then, tonight, by the time Miharu and I visit, I'd like them to think carefully and decide if they'd like to meet him at the castle.

Understood. I'll be off now. Aishia promptly left Rio's body in her spirit form and headed for the stone house. At

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that very moment, a knock on the door echoed through the living room.

"...I wonder who that is?" Satsuki said, standing up and heading towards the door. She proceeded to open it to reveal the two female soldiers that had been on guard before her rooms, as well as Takahisa and Lilianna. They were accompanied by Lilianna's attendant, Frill, and her guard knights.

"Hey, Satsuki." Takahisa greeted her with a rather awkward smile.

"...Takahisa." Satsuki blinked. She was sure she'd told him she had something important to discuss with Miharu, so she would contact him later. And yet, he had shown up here like this...

"I'm sorry. I just couldn't wait any longer..."

"Ahaha, well, we were just wrapping up our discussion..." Satsuki said, turning back to the living room. Rio and Miharu were seated together, their gazes directed at the visitors.

Of course, the sight of Rio and Miharu sitting together was also within Takahisa's field of view.

"Ugh..." Instantly, Takahisa's face darkened as he clenched his jaw. He wasn't very impressed to hear he had been excluded while they were discussing something important.

Satsuki sighed quietly. "...I suppose it's good timing. There's something we'd like to tell you, as well. Would you like to come in? Umm, sorry to say this to the Princess, but we'd like to speak to Takahisa alone."

"Is that okay, Lily?" Takahisa looked at Lilianna, who stood behind him.

"...They're friends you haven't met in a long time, so I'm sure you have many things to discuss. In that case, I won't act so uncouth as to insist upon my presence, but..." Lilianna paused for a moment, glancing at Rio—who had no

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relationship with Takahisa—before giving her answer cheerfully.

"If so, I shall also excuse myself." Rio read the implied message and immediately offered to leave.

"Ah, but…" Satsuki reflexively hesitated, trying to stop Rio.

"If you're disallowing Her Highness' presence with the reasoning of a reunion between friends, then there's no sense in me being treated specially, is there? I'm sure that position-wise, Princess Lilianna would prefer to remain with Takahisa as much as possible, too," Rio explained, showing consideration for Lilianna.

It couldn't be easy for the Centostella Kingdom to let go of their hero. They would want to keep him within their field of view as much as possible, after all—especially when he was going to be in the presence of an unknown, newly-appointed noble. It was all the more unfavorable for Lilianna from her position. If anything, they should be wary of it. It was also the nature of their closed-off kingdom.

"I appreciate your consideration, Sir Amakawa." Lilianna spoke the family name Rio had announced at the audience with the king, having clearly remembered it.

"Not at all. It is an honor to make your acquaintance," Rio said, showing respectful humility. Thus, Takahisa took Rio's place in the discussion with Satsuki and Miharu as Rio left the room.

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After leaving the room, Rio and Lilianna descended the tower staircase together. Lilianna's attendant, Frill, and the female knights Hilda, Kiara, and Alice took up the rear.

They're watching me. Are they wary of me? No, that's not it… Rio felt their gazes on him and casually glanced backwards. Alice was staring intently at him. It was a bit too

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blatant to be a look of caution—it seemed more like she was staring out of curiosity.

Just then, Lilianna spoke. “Sir Amakawa, how would you like to join me for a bit of conversation? You seem close to Lady Satsuki and Lady Miharu, so I would love to hear your thoughts.”

“…Of course, I have no reason to refuse. If Your Highness finds me a worthy conversation partner then it would be my pleasure to fulfill that role.” While Rio was slightly taken aback by the sudden request, he agreed readily. One could not refuse a royal’s request for no reason, after all.

“Thank you very much. The area we’re staying in just so happens to be at the base of this tower, so let us head there.” Thus, the party spent the next minute leisurely making their way down the stairs towards the guest rooms where Lilianna was staying. On the way, they happened across Charlotte and Christina chatting in the corridor. The two of them were accompanied by their respective attendants, who were waiting nearby.

“My, if it isn’t Princess Lilianna. And Sir Haruto, too. What might you two be up to?” Charlotte asked curiously.

“Sir Takahisa is in Lady Satsuki’s quarters speaking with her and Lady Miharu, so I had a free moment to spare. I was thinking of sitting down with Sir Haruto,” Lilianna explained.

“Oh my, is that so? In that case, I would love to join you.”

“Of course, you’re more than welcome to,” Lilianna readily agreed.

“Thank you. How about you, Princess Christina? You were about to return to your quarters just now, no?” Charlotte said brightly.

“I… No, I shall. It’s a rare occasion, so I would appreciate the opportunity.” Christina looked like she was about to refuse for a brief moment, but she seemed to change her mind when she saw Rio’s face.

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“Then, it’s decided.” Charlotte beamed happily. “Oh… Princess Flora!” By pure coincidence, she spotted Flora passing by further down the corridor and called her name eagerly.

Flora had been walking alongside the female knight that had been accompanying her, but came to a stop when she heard her name. When she spotted Rio and her older sister Christina, her eyes widened, and she approached hurriedly.

“…Umm, why is everyone gathered here like this?” she asked Charlotte, while at the same time having her attention focused on Rio and Christina. Whereas Rio bowed once, Christina didn’t spare her a glance and remained standing still.

“I had just spotted Princess Christina in the hallway and was talking to her when Princess Lilianna and Sir Haruto appeared, so the four of us are about to have tea together.” Charlotte looked between the two sisters of the Beltrum Kingdom casually and spoke with a beaming smile.

For the record, tea parties were how women in royal and noble circles socialized, and an invitation to tea was the same as an invitation to chat. While there were exceptions, it was a silently accepted rule that the higher-ranked person would invite a lower-ranked person to tea if their conversation was to be drawn out. If they were at equal standing, then it didn’t matter who did the inviting. Conversely, if the higher-ranked person didn’t extend an invitation to tea, it was a silent way of expressing that they didn’t want to talk for long. In this regard, one needed to be able to read the room with great sensitivity.

“Everyone is having tea together…” Flora seemed to want to join in herself, as she looked around at the four of them with slightly envious, puppy-like eyes. Charlotte tilted her head.

“What were you doing, Princess Flora?”

“I was thinking of taking a short walk before returning to

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my rooms…” Flora replied honestly. Like Christina and Lilianna, the rooms Flora was staying in were also on this floor.

“I see,” Charlotte nodded, smiling cheerfully. However, that was all she said. She didn’t proceed to invite Flora along right away.

“…Umm. Then, if you would excuse me.” Flora looked uncomfortable and avoided meeting anyone’s eyes as she slowly tried to turn back.

“Oh my, hold on a minute. Would you like to join us too, Princess Flora?” It was at this point that Charlotte finally invited Flora to tea.

“Huh? But… Are you sure?” Flora asked timidly, watching Rio and Christina’s expressions.

“Of course. I don’t mind,” Charlotte nodded brightly.

“I would be happy to have you there, too. I rarely ever have the chance to have tea with princesses from other kingdoms,” Lilianna also agreed cheerfully.

“I also have no reason to refuse,” Rio added. From a social standpoint, Rio wasn’t able to refuse like the rest of them.

This left her older sister Christina, who was currently here as an ambassador for the Kingdom of Beltrum. As Flora’s sister, who was the representative of the Restoration, which was rebelling against her kingdom, they were in opposing factions.

However, as she had already agreed to joining them for tea, changing her mind so blatantly would be seen as an act of disrespect towards Charlotte and Lilianna.

“…I don’t mind either.” Christina restrained herself from sighing heavily and nodded with a poker face.

“Thank you so much,” Flora said happily.

“Now, where shall we go to talk? I was planning on using the guest room where I’m staying, but…” said Lilianna.

“There’s a rooftop garden for the royalty here to use. Allow me to lead the way,” Charlotte immediately suggested,

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and began to move. And so, Rio ended up going to a tea party with the four princesses of Galarc, Beltrum, and Centostella, representing the three large kingdoms spanning from the west to the east of Strahl.

They were surrounded by their respective attendants, making for a rather large party. Naturally, just walking through the castle like that attracted much attention. The people they passed by in the corridors would be drawn to the four beautiful princesses first. Then, most people would widen their eyes and freeze, before snapping back to their senses and hurrying down a side corridor to avoid them.

The next one to catch their attention would be Rio, the lone man among them who had just been appointed as an honorary knight. The sight of these four people gathering to have tea was so unheard of, it was likely that it would never happen again. There was no way they weren't conspicuous.

I'm going to wear myself out before the third night even begins. Just how did things end up like this? While any other boy of the royal family would have been envious and enthusiastic over such a situation, Rio's face twitched silently instead.

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Some time before then, in Satsuki's quarters, an explanation was being given to Takahisa. Satsuki had emphasized how the things they were about to say were to be kept strictly between them, before informing Takahisa that Aki and Masato were safe.

"Aki and Masato… they're safe?" Takahisa parroted Satsuki's words in shock.

"Yes. Haruto took them in, along with Miharu, and they are currently living in a safe place. The only ones who know this are Haruto, Miharu, and myself. And now you, Takahisa. Make sure you keep that in mind," Satsuki

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explained.

“Haruto did…?” Takahisa said, looking slightly conflicted.

“The two of them wandered into this world with Miharu, so they were saved along with her.”

“W-Wait just a second. If that’s the case, then why weren’t they brought to the castle, too?”

“They couldn’t be sure of how they would be treated at the castle. That’s why Miharu came with Haruto on their behalf first.”

“You said they’re in a safe place… is that place really safe?”

“They’ve been safe until today, haven’t they?” Satsuki pointed out to calm Takahisa.

“…But if the two of them are safe, I’ll take them in! And Miharu, too!” Takahisa blurted out in frustration, unable to take it any longer. Miharu was about to say something reflexively, but Satsuki stopped her with a hand.

“That wouldn’t be you taking them in, but the Centostella Kingdom, no? If they came to the castle, they could be used in a political way. They might lose their freedom to act, too. And while it might be your responsibility to look after Aki and Masato as their older brother, that’s not the case for Miharu, no?” she said with a sigh.

“B-But the castle is definitely safer! Lily is trustworthy, too!”

“If you’re insisting that much, then I’ll believe she isn’t a bad person at heart. But that doesn’t mean we can trust her. I don’t know what kind of person Princess Lilianna is, and I don’t know what kind of kingdom Centostella is, either. Even if the princess is a good person, the kingdom could be different. Would Princess Lilianna be able to go against the interests of her kingdom to act on Aki and Masato’s behalf? Does she have the power to do so?”

“That’s…!” Takahisa tried to object, but struggled to find his words.

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“You can’t say for certain, right? Even I don’t trust the Galarc Kingdom completely. That’s why I can understand your desire to stay with your little brother and sister, and I personally would like to stay with you too, but I’m worried…” Satsuki added, frowning.

“You say you’re worried, but I’m more worried not having them beside me. I just can’t sit still and wonder if something might happen to them. I’ve already experienced that enough in these past few months. The pain of not having the people I care about beside me… Not being able to protect them if something happens…”

“I believe they’ll be safe as long as they’re under Haruto’s protection, though…” Satsuki realized that just like how Lilianna was for her, Haruto was someone Takahisa probably couldn’t trust, either.

“…It seems like you trust Haruto quite a bit, Satsuki,” Takahisa said with a slightly biting tone.

“Well, Haruto does have the track record of protecting Miharu from the moment she came to this world. He even brought her to us. Even though he wouldn’t have gotten anything out of it, helping a stranger… helping strangers like Miharu and your siblings, you know? And when I actually sat down and talked to him, he seemed like a really sincere person.” Satsuki looked at Miharu as she spoke of Rio’s accomplishments and personality. They weren’t entirely strangers, so she fumbled a bit with her words, but Takahisa didn’t seem to find that particularly strange.

“Then you should trust me, too! And you should trust Lily, who’s been supporting me until now! Do you not want to believe me, Satsuki?” Takahisa objected heatedly.

“Of course, I believe your feelings about Aki, Masato, and Miharu are true. I also believe you have a responsibility over Aki and Masato as their older brother, and that it would normally be the right thing for you to do. We don’t deny that and won’t stop you from meeting them.” In contrast, Satsuki

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spoke calmly to Takahisa.

“Then…!” Takahisa seemed to have taken Satsuki’s words as something encouraging, as he smiled in relief. However, he looked sullen once again because of what Satsuki said next.

“But if you’re going to meet Aki and Masato, I want you to promise that you won’t ignore their own intentions. While I know you must have been anxious being alone this entire time, that doesn’t mean you can just push your opinion onto others, you know? Not everyone might think the same way as you. Furthermore, you don’t have the power to decide Miharu’s actions for yourself, Takahisa.”

“…”

“Sorry for sounding so bossy. But when I look at you right now, all I see is your anxiety. There’s no guarantee that Aki and Masato think the same way as you, and if that were the case, I don’t want you to force your opinions onto them. I’d be happy if you didn’t think of this as me lecturing you, but rather a request from an upperclassman.” Satsuki looked a little guilty as she spoke to the silent Takahisa.

“Right…” Takahisa pouted and nodded.

“Then… I doubt I need to ask again, but do you want to see Aki and Masato?”

“Yes.”

“The two of them are currently living outside the castle. As heroes, we won’t be able to leave the castle with no explanation to the king, and even if we explained it, they’ll just tell us to call them here. So, if you want to meet them, we’ll have to bring Aki and Masato to the castle. But the final decision of whether they want to come to the castle or not falls on the two of them. How long do you think you can stay in this kingdom, Takahisa?”

“They figured we’d have a few things to catch up on, so we’ll be staying for a few days longer.”

“Then it shouldn’t be a problem. Haruto will visit the two

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of them as early as tomorrow to explain the situation. If the two of them agree to come to the castle, he should be able to bring them right over. Can you wait until then?”

“…Of course.” Takahisa suppressed his desire to see them right away and nodded sullenly.

“That settles it. Are you okay with this, Miharu?” Satsuki exhaled, turning to Miharu. She nodded slowly.

“Yes. Sorry, I left all the explaining to you…”

“It’s fine—this is my job as your upperclassman,” Satsuki boasted a bit, shrugging her shoulders.

“Thank you. So all that’s left is to wait until Haru-kun… Haruto returns? Was there anything else we had to say…?” Miharu smiled softly and relaxed, which probably caused her to accidentally call Haruto “Haru-kun.” She immediately corrected herself into saying “Haruto,” but Satsuki and Takahisa both heard her clearly. Takahisa looked like he wanted to say something in response to the intimate nickname.

“…What’s the plan for Haruto?” Takahisa asked, but he couldn’t ask about the nickname Haru-kun.

“Haruto’s staying in these rooms too,” Satsuki answered.

“What?!” Takahisa’s expression fell in shock. He looked at Miharu and Satsuki incredulously, as though he was questioning what they were thinking.

“Even though he’s staying here, he has a separate bedroom.” So it wasn’t a problem, Satsuki implied.

“Still, staying in the same rooms as a man in your age group…” Takahisa simply couldn’t wrap his mind around it.

“It was easier to share information by having him stay in these quarters. Anyway, you’re staying in the same rooms as Princess Lilianna, aren’t you?”

“It’s fine for me! I swear I wouldn’t do anything like forcefully approach a woman, and the other guard knights and attendants are there, too. But here it’s just you and Miharu, right? You’re putting too much trust in him.”

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“You speak as though you’re an exception… Just so you know, Haruto isn’t the type to forcefully approach a woman, either. Isn’t that right, Miharu?” Satsuki laughed with slight exasperation before suddenly turning to Miharu.

“Eh? Ah, y-yes!” Miharu hadn’t expected to be asked about it, so she was taken aback at first. Takahisa saw that the two of them trusted Haruto completely and frowned in disapproval.

…Satsuki seems to be concerned about bringing Aki and Masato to the castle, but I’m more concerned not having them with me. And Miharu too… He couldn’t leave them to anyone else. If anything bad happened to them while they were away from him, he’d regret it.

Aki and Masato will definitely come to see me. Then, the three of us will be together and we can finally settle into a steady life. No, Miharu has to be by my side, too. I will protect her and I’ll regret nothing. That’s why I need to tell her, once Aki and Masato arrive… Takahisa silently decided with determination.

The conversation continued for a while after that, but before long, they had finished explaining everything they could to Takahisa. Satsuki suggested they go look for Rio, hoping that Takahisa could learn more about him.

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Meanwhile, some time after Satsuki and Miharu had finished their conversation with Takahisa…

Only a small number of people—including the royal family and their attendants—could access the Galarc castle rooftop garden. Rio found himself seated there with four beautiful princesses: Charlotte, Flora, Christina, and Lilianna.

Tea and sweets were prepared promptly, and the tea party commenced.

The attendants and female knights of each kingdom stood

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around Rio, creating a situation where everyone apart from Rio was a woman. They all stood silently as the princesses chatted brightly amongst themselves.

The content of their discussion focused on Rio, who was currently the hottest topic of the castle. First, each princess offered him words of congratulations for his promotion to an honorary knighthood.

“The way you fought at the banquet was wonderful. You drove back the invaders with truly incredible skill, especially that final moment where you cut down the photon bullets with your dagger,” Charlotte said, commending Rio openly.

“It was a splendid sight. I’m impressed that you were able to cut down those countless bullets of light magic flying at such rapid speeds. Were you able to see the trajectory of all those lights?” Christina asked, admiration in her voice.

“Yes, somehow.” Rio nodded rather awkwardly, as the eyes of everyone present were focused solely on him.

“Such a feat cannot be accomplished by just anyone, you realize? Even those who were trained to fight… Would you be able to do it, Vanessa?” Christina asked, turning to question the female knight in her twenties; Vanessa was standing a short distance away from her. She thought for a moment before answering.

“…I do not believe so. To be honest, I wouldn’t even think of attempting it. Everyone on the upper floor behind Sir Amakawa was at risk of being caught in the crossfire, though I believe he had no choice but to do what he did in that situation.”

Vanessa…? When Rio heard the name, he felt a faint tug on his memory. He had heard it before, and glanced at Vanessa’s face out of curiosity.

Not only her name—her face was familiar, too.

Ah, is she perhaps the female knight that was in the slums that time? Along with Professor and Christina… Rio recalled Vanessa in the recesses of his memory. She was the

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one who had forced Rio to go to the castle, stating the need for questioning. That had left an impression.

"What about you, Hilda?" Lilianna turned around to question the oldest knight that was guarding her. Hilda was similar in age to Vanessa.

"...If I could enhance my physical body with an enchanted sword, I believe I would be able to grasp the basics, but I'm not so confident I would be able to actually see all the trajectories and counter them. It would definitely be impossible with regular physical body enchantment through sorcery or magic," Hilda replied.

"That just shows how superior Sir Haruto's skills are, I suppose," Charlotte said brightly.

"I do have a little confidence in my kinetic vision," Rio admitted somewhat shyly.

Well, I am enhancing my physical body with spirit arts too, after all, he thought, looking back on the battle. He had suppressed his abnormal power a fair amount so that no onlookers would suspect anything, but even then, Rio had moved in a way that exceeded the normal physical limits that sorcery and magic could enhance up to.

In his natural state, Rio's physical body was no different to that of a regular person. He couldn't move beyond the limits of his body, either.

"Oh, such modesty. While the other knights were struggling to finish off the other invaders in a one-on-one duel, Sir Haruto shut down six of them easily," Charlotte said.

"Yes, it was truly splendid," Lilianna agreed without hesitation.

"Oh yes, speaking of which— Princess Flora. You witnessed Sir Haruto fight from up close in the battle at Amande, no?" Charlotte suddenly asked.

"Huh? Ah, yes... I saw him when he was fighting monsters on the main street, as well as when I was abducted by a

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mercenary named Lucius.” Flora watched Rio’s expression carefully and nodded.

“I’ve heard that powerful monsters called minotaurs had spawned, and that Lucius was fairly skilled himself. I would love to hear more about how Sir Haruto fought,” Charlotte expressed curiously with her innocent face, pleading for details.

“It was amazing. He went face-to-face against a minotaur that was several meters tall with a huge stone sword, and the mercenary… The mercenary was completely overwhelmed… And he used his enchanted sword to repel the sudden breath attack of the demi-dragon…” Flora watched Rio’s face as she grasped for words. In the battle with Lucius, Rio had used some kind of tremendous wave attack that clearly wasn’t magic, but she purposefully chose not to say anything about it.

“…He really has achieved some tremendous things.” Lilianna’s eyes were round and wide as she looked at Rio, who mustered a bashful smile. Meanwhile, Christina hadn’t said a word to Flora since the start of the tea party and hadn’t even met her gaze once, as though there was no one seated there.

“…” She gave the slightest of glances to Flora, before frowning faintly. After that, she looked at Rio as though she was about to say something, then hesitated, before ultimately closing her mouth.

“Hehe, Princess Flora has been saved by Sir Haruto multiple times.” Charlotte smiled almost gloatingly, looking at Christina as she spoke to Flora.

“Yes. I would like to repay the debt somehow, but…” Flora watched Rio’s face and showed a darker expression on her own. She may have been recalling Rio’s past that she had heard during the battle with Lucius.

“My answer to that has not changed since I last spoke to you in Amande,” Rio said softly, shaking his head. Christina

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looked between Rio and Flora's faces with a thoughtful expression.

At the gazebo where they were holding their tea party, which was a simple structure placed as a resting area in the garden, a servant girl of the Galarc Kingdom appeared. For her to be permitted here, she must have worked closely under Charlotte.

"Princess Charlotte, please excuse the interruption. Lady Satsuki and Lady Miharu have arrived with the hero of the Centostella Kingdom. They say they're searching for Sir Amakawa. Shall I show them here?"

"Of course, go right ahead. Bring them here promptly," Charlotte said, and the girl left. Less than a minute later, Satsuki and the others arrived behind the same girl.

"Hello—sorry for disturbing your downtime. Everyone's here together…" Satsuki blinked at the sight of all the great kingdoms' princesses gathered together. When she spotted Rio among them, she looked at him in exasperation.

"…Is something the matter, Lady Satsuki?" Rio inquired. They were surrounded by princesses, so he called her by her title.

"No, not really… I'm just surprised to see you having fun drinking tea with so many princesses in the short time you were separated from us. I should have expected as much from the *Black Knight*." Satsuki seemed to be a little annoyed after all, but she finished her thought with a teasing smile.

I can't believe he was off surrounding himself with cute girls while we were caught up in a serious conversation, she thought, puffing her cheeks up slightly.

"Ahaha… That is the honorable second name bestowed upon me by His Majesty, but I feel the title of 'Black Knight' is still too heavy a burden—and somewhat embarrassing to hear. If you could perhaps refrain from using it…" Rio forced an uncomfortable smile as he pleaded with Satsuki in a

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roundabout way.

"Oh? But it's so *cool*."

"I beg of you, *Great Hero*."

"Urgh..." Satsuki's face twitched in embarrassment.

"Is everything all right, Lady Satsuki?" Charlotte cocked her head in question.

"No, it's just that having Haruto call me 'hero' feels really embarrassing, even though I'm fine when other people call me that."

"In that case, please call me as you normally do, too," Rio asked a bashful Satsuki.

"Fine. Gosh." Satsuki pouted her lips.

"Hehe, the two of you seem so close. Now, come and take a seat, the three of you—welcome to the tea party. Lady Satsuki can sit beside Sir Haruto, Sir Takahisa can sit beside Princess Lilianna, and Lady Miharu can sit between them." Charlotte beamed happily, deciding the order of seating for the three of them and urging them into their seats.

"Okay, excuse us, then. Let's sit down, Miharu." Takahisa walked forward first, pulling out Miharu's seat for her.

"...Yeah. Thank you." Miharu nodded with a slightly troubled face, walking to the seat.

"Here you are, Lady Satsuki." Rio also stood up to pull out Satsuki's seat for her.

"Thanks, Haruto." Satsuki chuckled as she sat down.

Once Takahisa sat in his seat, he turned to Lilianna. "So you were here too, Lily. But how did this lineup gather together like this? Even Princess Christina and Princess Flora are here..."

"Ah, I was a little curious about that, too. Only 30 minutes have passed since Haruto left the room with Princess Lilianna..." Satsuki immediately jumped on that topic.

"After Sir Haruto and I descended the tower staircase, we ran into Princess Christina and Princess Charlotte talking together. That was when we decided to have tea," Lilianna

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answered with a gentle smile.

"We were just talking about Sir Haruto right now," Charlotte explained to Satsuki and the others.

"Hmm, about Haruto, you say…" Satsuki looked at Rio sitting beside her with interest.

"Hehe, are you interested?" Charlotte giggled mischievously.

"Well, yes. Aren't you, too, Miharu?" Satsuki wasn't entirely against the idea, nodding before looking at Miharu beside her.

"…Yes, I am curious." Miharu nodded firmly, staring closely at Rio on the other side of Satsuki. But Rio seemed to be feeling a little awkward, as he avoided Miharu's gaze.

Satsuki and Miharu's interest was drawn towards Rio, whereas Takahisa looked a little bitter and unamused. When Lilianna noticed that, her widened eyes welled with slight anguish.

At the same time, Flora seemed to be concerned by Rio and her older sister Christina, as she was glancing between them. Christina seemed to have noticed her little sister's gaze, but purposefully chose to look the other way. Charlotte carefully observed all of it.

I had a hunch Sir Takahisa was besotted with Lady Miharu at the banquet last night, but it doesn't seem like Lady Miharu returns those feelings. But Lady Miharu is in love with Sir Haruto, and although Sir Haruto has noticed this, for some reason, he is trying to distance himself. No, perhaps he's worried about it? And, finally, Princess Flora seems to hold some feelings toward Sir Haruto, but Sir Haruto thinks nothing of it. Oh, how I look forward to tonight's banquet. Charlotte's mouth twitched faintly.

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Chapter 2: Banquet Day 3

That night, Rio once again donned his formalwear to attend the third night of the banquet. Since introductions had been completed in the first two days, there were no dragged-out introductions of each kingdom's royalty and nobility, allowing the opening ceremony to wrap up quickly.

From the upper level of the hall, Francois looked down at the attendees on the floor of the venue. The event began with a formal greeting. "Everyone, thank you for gathering. While the disturbance last night was tremendously unfortunate, the mastermind has yet to be identified due to the apprehended assailants all committing suicide. Fortunately, there were no casualties amongst the attendees, allowing us to safely proceed with the final night of this banquet. For that, we are most blessed.

"Tonight, I shall be introducing the two valiant figures who contributed brilliantly to that. One used the bow divine arms skillfully to take out two assailants in the blink of an eye: Rui Shigekura. The other is Haruto, who defeated six attackers in an instant. Both of you, step forth," Francois said, inviting Rio and Rui forward. Once the two of them stood side by side, the attendees in the hall waited for Francois' next words.

"Both Rui and Haruto are quite modest, you see. Rui insists the star of last night's roundup was purely Haruto, and accepted a meager medal for his reward. Haruto declined to receive any reward at all, despite being the final stronghold who repelled six of the attackers. He refused me so bluntly, even I was taken by surprise." Francois chuckled at that, causing the venue to snicker along with him.

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“However, we eventually settled on something. Considering his great contributions to the defense of our kingdom’s key city, Amande, as well as the rescue of the Restoration’s Princess Flora and our own kingdom’s Liselotte Cretia, I have awarded Haruto with the title of an honorary knight.”

The hall buzzed immediately. Among them were people who had attended the audience where Rio was appointed as an honorary knight, those who had heard of the rumors quickly, and those who were unaware—but it was still shocking news to all of them. They couldn’t help but talk about it amongst themselves.

“Silence! Silence, please!” The voice of the male knight leading the ceremony echoed through the hall, promptly silencing the chatter.

“Allow me to introduce him once again. The man who has been appointed an honorary knight of our kingdom as of today, the Black Knight: Haruto Amakawa.” Francois raised his voice louder and introduced Rio, who was standing beside him, to the royalty and nobility in the hall.

Rio, dressed in his formal outfit, placed a hand against his chest and bowed reverently. The hall burst into applause.

“Dear me. As unprecedented a move as this was, after seeing such military prowess at a scene like that, I have no choice but to accept this decision from His Majesty.”

“Yes, the way he fought last night was most splendid.”

“Even so, to be appointed as an honorary knight at that age… He must be the youngest in history, no?”

The guests on the first floor of the hall exchanged such words as they looked up at Rio. At the same time, on the upper floor, the heroes from each kingdom and their partners all stood watching Rio’s back.

The Black Knight… Ugh. No matter how many times I hear it, it sounds so childish. I would have been writhing in embarrassment if they gave it to me… …Damn it, part of

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me thinks it's cool at the same time! Hiroaki frowned at his conflicted thoughts. He found the idea of proclaiming oneself the Black Knight to be terribly embarrassing, but he was envious of the attention gathered on Rio.

As he was pondering to himself, the applause in the hall ceased.

"Ah, that's right. I must introduce the partners of each kingdom's hero, including Haruto's. Everyone, could you step forward?" Francois invited the remaining heroes and their partners to come closer, so that they could stand within view of the attendees in the hall.

"As the second night of the banquet was suspended partway, they will be attending in the same pairs. You may address them with that in mind." In other words, Rio's partners were Satsuki and Charlotte, Takahisa's partners were Lilianna and Miharu, Hiroaki's partners were Flora and Roanna, and Rui's partner was Christina.

"Hehe, your formal outfit looks good on you again today, Haruto." Satsuki stood next to Rio and complimented him with a giggle.

"I agree. I almost want to forget my position and follow you all night," Charlotte whispered to Rio on the opposite side of Satsuki.

"Hahaha… Thank you very much." Rio's smile twitched faintly as he thanked them.

"…" Miharu watched Rio converse with them familiarly with a frustrated frown. Takahisa was watching Miharu do so, and tightly clenched his fist.

"Now, I'm sure many of you didn't get to socialize enough due to the uproar last night. Both the interior and exterior of the venue has had its security strengthened, so there will be no more miscreants running about. Rest assured, everyone. This concludes my greetings, short as they may have been. With this, the opening ceremony has concluded." Francois finally declared the start of the third night of the banquet.

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Applause rang through the hall once again, the attendees ready and raring to make the most of this valuable social event where heroes from different kingdoms had gathered. However, among them, one man sneered coldly to himself.

Well, no matter how cautious they are tonight, nothing will happen. It was the Proxia Empire ambassador, Reiss, who was hidden in the crowd as one of Rubia Kingdom's First Princess Sylvie's attendants.

Sylvie and her subordinates were spread around Reiss, nervously watching him for any odd movements. However, Reiss had no intention of doing such a thing as he boldly stared up at Rio on the upper floor.

Haruto Amakawa, hm? According to Lucius, his name was Rio, though... That's right, the same name as the orphan that gave Charles a run for his money in the Beltrum Kingdom, Reiss thought, grinning eerily.

"Tch... disgusting." Sylvie watched Reiss with a bitter expression on her face.

"Oh? The night has just begun, yet you don't seem to be very pleased, Your Highness," Reiss said innocently, catching Sylvie's expression from the corner of his eye.

"Hmm..." Sylvie turned her nose away and huffed.

"Oh my, it seems I'm still being suspected for last night's disturbance..." Reiss shrugged his shoulders exaggeratedly.

Despite everything, I am grateful to you, Your Highness. In consideration of your usefulness, I really will refrain from pulling anything tonight. He grinned.

"It isn't my intention to anger you any more than this myself. To clear your suspicions, I will stick to sides like a wallflower all night. If you would like to place a guard on me, feel free to do so," Reiss said dramatically. He then took a few steps forward, before turning around with a look that asked what she would do about it.

"You lot, follow him." Sylvie ground her teeth as she ordered her guards beside her to accompany Reiss.

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About ten minutes after the banquet commenced, Duke Huguenot came over to Rio, who was still on the upper floor of the hall. He was accompanied by a number of noble men and women.

“Congratulations on your appointment to honorary knight, Haruto. No, I should call you Sir Amakawa now… Congratulations, Sir Amakawa,” the duke said to Rio, correcting himself.

“Thank you for your kind words,” Rio replied with a bow.

“I pray that your endeavors will always be blessed. May our friendship continue long into the future.” Duke Huguenot extended his hand for Rio to shake.

“Indeed.” Although Rio would prefer to have nothing to do with the people of the Beltrum Kingdom, he accepted the handshake with a polite smile.

“Thank you. I look forward to it. Now, setting that aside, I have had the honor of meeting with Sir Amakawa as well as Lady Satsuki and Princess Charlotte several times in these last two days. If you do not mind, may I perhaps introduce you to some of the nobility from the Restoration once more?” Duke Huguenot asked, shrewdly including Satsuki and Charlotte into his request.

For the record, introducing yourself to a person of higher status numerous times was considered impolite. However, during events with many participants, it was acceptable to do so several times depending on your own status. The person of higher status couldn’t be expected to remember everyone with only one meeting, so they also preferred to be greeted multiple times.

“Of course, we don’t mind at all. Isn’t that right, Lady Satsuki?” Charlotte accepted with a bright smile.

“Yes.” Satsuki nodded without any sign of negativity, seemingly accustomed to the process. She may have already

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been familiar with these situations due to her life on Earth as a rich family's daughter, or perhaps the last three days of the banquet had helped her become used to it.

"You have my gratitude. Step forward, everyone." Duke Huguenot lowered his head respectfully before inviting the nobles behind him forward. The first ones to approach were noblemen who appeared to be the heads of their houses, and they proceeded to introduce themselves. Right next to them were their daughters, who stood there gracefully.

The men had been carefully selected by Duke Huguenot for their attendance, so they all had exceptional oratory skills. The conversation gradually divided, leaving Satsuki, Charlotte, and Rio to handle their own separate groups.

After a while, the two noblemen that had been talking to Rio headed towards Satsuki and Charlotte, leaving Rio in a state with no conversation partner.

"You lot may as well greet Haruto," Duke Huguenot said, approaching Rio with the noble daughters of the Restoration. The ladies were all in their early to mid-teens and walked closer to Rio with nervous footsteps.

"...Pleased to meet you. I'm Haruto Amakawa. It's an honor to make your acquaintances. If you would like, could you please introduce yourselves to me?" Rio felt a little uncomfortable under the gaze of the group of girls, but he greeted them with a friendly smile on the surface. The two girls from the highest-ranked houses spoke first.

"Nice to meet you. I am Elise of the house of Count Brandt."

"I'm Dorothea, from the house of Count Albert."

Huh? These two... The names and faces of the two girls before him gave Rio a sense of deja vu. Of course they would; they were his former classmates at the Royal Academy. Elise had even been in the same squad as him in the outdoor drill in their sixth year. However, in the nearly four years that they hadn't seen each other, they had lost a

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lot of their childish facial structure, maturing into adult women. Neither of them seemed to realize that Haruto Amakawa was Rio.

“Pleased to make your acquaintance.” Once Rio realized where he knew them from, his expression stiffened for a brief moment, before he replied with a friendly smile. After that, the other girls continued to give simple introductions of themselves to Rio, who received them all sociably.

All of the girls, including Elise and Dorothea, stared at Rio intently. They were all beautiful women that moved with elegance and spoke with modesty, but Rio knew how nasty their personalities were during their school days, and had to keep focused to stop his face from twitching.

...*Hm?* At that very moment, Rio made eye contact with Flora, who had been moving together with Hiroaki and Roanna elsewhere on the upper floor of the hall. She had a conflicted expression from seeing Rio interact with the girls that had been his former classmates and averted her eyes awkwardly when they met.

Rio sighed as he looked away from Flora. He glanced at Miharu, who was together with Takahisa and Lilianna in another part of the room. But at that point, the final girl had finished introducing herself to Rio, so he drew his attention back to the conversation at hand.

“Thank you for telling me your names. I will be sure to remember them,” Rio said, making the girls beam with delight. It was at that moment that Charlotte wrapped up her conversation with the nobles and walked over with Satsuki.

“Sir Haruto, if you’ve finished your greetings, how about that dance with Lady Satsuki and I? We couldn’t have one last night due to those unruly intruders.” Charlotte looped her arm through Rio’s and looked up at his face imploringly.

“Yes, of course,” Rio nodded with a wry smile. He was feeling a bit downcast after dealing with his former

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classmates, so he was grateful for the excuse to leave. The girls looked like they still wanted to talk to Rio, but…

“Well then, everyone. Please excuse us.” Charlotte made use of her position as a princess and gave a firm farewell to Duke Huguenot and his people, pulling Rio away easily.

Satsuki spoke up quietly after they had walked some distance away. “You sure are popular, Haruto…”

“Naturally. Other than the heroes, Sir Haruto is gathering the most attention right now. His appearance is what it is, and his exceptional abilities have been proven after last night. Duke Huguenot was also most cunning. I’m sure he hoped that one of the girls would catch Sir Haruto’s eyes,” Charlotte muttered with an adorably sullen look.

“Hmm. And? Did any of them do just that, Haruto?” Satsuki asked with a sidelong glance.

“What?”

“Are you not listening? We’re talking about whether any girls caught your eye.”

“I am far too unworthy to consider such a thing… And I still don’t know any of them very well to begin with.” Rio chose his words carefully. It would be a lie to say that there had been, but being foolishly honest by replying that there weren’t could make him seem shallow and worsen their relationship.

“Hehe, what a Haruto-like answer.” Satsuki seemed to find that amusing, as she giggled to herself. Haruto cocked his head in confusion, unsure of what would be considered typical for him.

“If Sir Haruto so desires, Father would surely supply you with many suitable women, so if you need some assistance in the marriage department, just say the word. Well, if you have someone in mind already, then there is no need to say any more…” Charlotte said, casually looking between Rio and Satsuki.

“I have answered this before, but I have no such person in

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mind," Rio replied softly.

"Hmm…" Satsuki hummed in contemplation, glancing at Rio's side profile.

"Marriage talk aside, I am reassured to hear that. It wouldn't do to ask for a dance from a gentleman with another woman in mind. This means there is nothing hindering Lady Satsuki and I from dancing with you. We excused ourselves under the pretext of dancing, so how about you two go first? I shall take the turn after Lady Satsuki," Charlotte smiled pleasantly. Rio naturally looked towards Satsuki, who glanced back at him.

"In that case, may I request one song from you, Lady Satsuki?" Rio asked gracefully, smiling gently.

"…Okay, fine. I guess." Satsuki nodded, looking a little bashful. They moved to the dance space on the first floor of the hall together with Charlotte.

"Ooh! Lady Satsuki is dancing with Sir Amakawa!"

"What? I can't miss that."

People began to gather around them, sensing that the two most talked-about people were about to dance. Rio and Satsuki waited for the previous song to end before stepping onto the dance floor, while Charlotte stood with the others waiting for a dance at the side.

Left to themselves, Rio and Satsuki both assumed their positions and brought their bodies close together.

"Ah, just so you know, I have experience with formal dances on Earth, but the social dances here are oddly slow. It feels rather clingy, like you spend a lot of time staring at your partner. So, I'm not really used to the dances here. Can you lead?" Satsuki asked as she looked up at Rio's face.

"Sure, I don't mind. I'm not very good myself, though."

"Huh, really? You can normally tell who isn't good from the moment you get into position, so I think you're one of the better people out there…"

"I've only practiced a little in the past, and all I did in

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preparation for this banquet was review that," Rio replied.

"Hmm. Well, you have some kind of training in martial arts and your sense of balance is perfect, so perhaps that's reflected in your dancing."

"In that case, wouldn't you be considered good too? You learned something as well, right? I can tell from the way you walk."

"Yeah. I learned kendo and a naginata, as well as karate and aikido for self-defense. What about you, Haruto? I couldn't quite tell based on what I saw of your fight last night... Was it jujutsu?"

"Amakawa Haruto learned an ancient style of martial arts that was passed down. It was originally a jujutsu that was influenced by Chinese martial arts in the Edo period, but after that, it was widely borrowed from both domestic and foreign techniques until it became its own style. Though the people who used it were pretty much unknown."

"Huh... Sounds interesting. Perhaps I'll ask to spar with you in that area one day." Satsuki grinned boldly, Rio's style of martial arts having caught her interest.

"If we have the chance, certainly." Rio chuckled.

"Speaking of chances, this is a good chance for me to ask—you told Miharu that she shouldn't stay with you, right?" Satsuki asked, suddenly changing the subject. They didn't have many opportunities to speak alone, so she figured this was the perfect time.

"Yes. How much did she tell you?" Rio replied in a calm voice.

"Nothing in detail. She looked really conflicted, so I figured it would be better to just ask you directly—is that okay?" Satsuki asked, watching Rio's face.

"I don't mind. You're Miharu's... The song's about to begin, so let's continue as we're dancing." Rio's expression clouded over softly as he interrupted himself. The song soon started, and Rio and Satsuki began to dance.

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“So, why do you think she would be better off staying away from you? You did get that Miharu wants to be with you, right?” Once they began dancing, Satsuki opened her mouth without waiting for Rio to speak first. He closed his eyes in thought for a moment, before immediately giving a self-loathing answer.

“…It’s because I’m a good-for-nothing, I suppose.”

“…A good-for-nothing? You? That’s not true.” Satsuki looked at Rio in exasperation, as though she couldn’t believe what he was saying.

“I’m simply good at keeping up appearances. There are things that will always be incompatible between me, who was born and raised in this world, and Miharu, who was born and raised in Japan.”

“So you’re saying you’ve been keeping those incompatible things hidden?”

“That’s right.” Rio moved elegantly as he led Satsuki through the dance, nodding shortly.

“Always incompatible, huh…” Satsuki muttered dubiously. She gave Rio a look that conveyed how she thought they should still stay together, if that was what Miharu wanted.

“For example, if you found out that a friend close to you had killed someone before, was trying to kill someone for a personal vendetta right now, and had committed numerous crimes in the past, what would you think?” Rio asked in a low voice, looking a little awkward.

“Are you… referring to yourself?” Satsuki gasped. Her body nearly stiffened in response, but her limbs continued to move due to his lead.

“She should think of me as a different person. Amakawa Haruto is dead. Even if Miharu seeks the Amakawa Haruto within me, I won’t be able to be that man. She’ll surely compare the two of us, even if she isn’t aware of it herself.”

And wouldn’t that just be painful for the both of us? was what Rio was implying. He may have been bound by the

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thought that Amakawa Haruto was the only one worthy of standing beside Miharu.

“That’s why you think she’s better off away from you?” Satsuki took a shaky breath and asked, her voice trembling slightly.

“Yes,” Rio confirmed, quietly but firmly.

“…I want to say something about that, but I can’t find the right words. I don’t think I can say that what you’re saying is completely incorrect… But it’s definitely logical to a fault.” Satsuki swallowed back the bitter feeling she had, her voice tinted with indignation.

“How harsh of you.” Rio’s reply was somewhat evasive.

“Obviously. This isn’t a topic to discuss here, so I won’t pry any further. But I don’t think there’s anything incompatible between you two. So don’t go deciding things for others so hastily.” Satsuki suddenly brought her face close to Rio’s, threatening as she stole the lead of the dance. They remained in that pose for a moment, staring at each other.

“Haha…” There was a slight shadow over Rio’s face as he chuckled.

“…The way you won’t obediently say yes shows how stubborn you can be, too, huh?” Satsuki glared at Rio reproachfully.

“Perhaps. By the way—” Rio acknowledged her words before looking around at their surroundings.

“What?” Satsuki frowned, looking suspicious.

“We seem to have gathered too much attention. Perhaps we should unwrap ourselves from this pose.” Rio said to Satsuki with a forced laugh.

“Huh…?” Satsuki’s eyes darted from left to right as she observed their surroundings.

“My oh my, how passionate…”

“Yes, Lady Satsuki can be quite bold at times.”

“What an interesting sight.”

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The gallery of royalty and nobility gathered around the dance floor were watching Rio and Satsuki curiously because of how close Satsuki had brought her face to Rio's, as though they were about to kiss. It must have been a sensational sight.

"Wha...?!" Satsuki was rendered speechless, turning bright red. The next moment, she hurriedly distanced her face from Rio's.

"The song's still playing, so let's finish the dance." Rio figured suspending their dance at this point would only be more suspicious, so he resumed leading Satsuki in the light footwork.

"Wai— H-Haruto!" In a quiet but shrill voice, Satsuki objected with all her might. Still, her arms and legs followed Rio's, moving along with him.

"Stopping the dance here would just attract more attention."

"G-Geez!" Satsuki still seemed to be feeling a little embarrassed, keeping her head tilted slightly downwards as she entrusted herself to Rio's lead.

"I didn't expect you to be the reckless type," Rio said with a chuckle.

"Meanwhile, you're the overly careful type that ends up doing nothing." Satsuki turned her nose away in a huff, cheeks still red.

"Perhaps." Rio nodded, giving his reply in a relaxed voice with a humble smile. Satsuki wasn't happy with that answer, pouting as she looked up at Rio.

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After that, Satsuki had much less to say out of embarrassment. However, the more she danced, the more she seemed to be having fun simply moving, and her expression gradually softened. Before long, the song was over and Rio and Satsuki came to a stop with a finishing pose.

“Hah, that was fun. Thanks, Haruto,” Satsuki said with an earnest smile.

“Agreed—thank you, Satsuki. Let’s return to Princess Charlotte.” Rio took Satsuki by the hand and escorted her back to Charlotte. Charlotte was grinning brightly as she welcomed them back.

“That was a wonderful dance, you two. Lady Satsuki appeared to be enjoying herself a lot. Showing such a bold and daring display of courtship… Oh, that’s right. Everyone seemed to be interested in seeing you two dance, so I invited them over to have a better view,” Charlotte said, looking around her. In the vicinity were Miharu with Takahisa and Lilianna, Hiroaki with Flora and Roanna, as well as Rui and Christina. All the heroes attending the banquet had gathered.

“T-That wasn’t an attempt at a kiss, so it’s not like it was a display of courtship or anything! Don’t get the wrong idea! Okay, Haruto?!” Satsuki tried to explain the misunderstanding in a fluster.

“Yes, I know.” Rio had to pull back from Satsuki’s overwhelming force to nod. Hiroaki, who had been watching that exchange from the side, was so shocked that he had to take a moment to close his eyes.

“No way… a real life… tsundere? Pfft, and it had to be that brazen woman of all people…” Hiroaki grimaced, frustrated at himself for finding charm in Satsuki’s actions for even a brief moment. On both sides of him stood Flora and Roanna, who had overheard his muttering but were confused as to what a “real life tsundere” was.

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“Hehe, you don’t seem that against the idea, though? I think you two would make a lovely match. Wouldn’t you agree, Sir Takahisa?” Charlotte smiled cheerfully, before suddenly turning to address Takahisa.

“W-Well, umm… Yes, they do suit each other. Satsuki looked like she was having the time of her life.” Takahisa’s eyes wandered as he searched for an answer, eventually landing on Miharu, who was looking between Rio and Satsuki with a slightly conflicted expression. He then smiled and nodded in a way that almost appeared servile. “…Does Satsuki have a crush on Haruto, perhaps?” Forcing down his guilty conscience, he put up an air of composure as he whispered a question only Miharu could hear.

“…” Miharu immediately averted her eyes from Rio and Satsuki. She didn’t respond to Takahisa’s question.

“See? Even Sir Takahisa, who knows Lady Satsuki very well, is saying that.” Charlotte was happy to receive the approval she sought from Takahisa.

“Enough already. Come on, Char. It’s your turn to dance with Rio next. Get going already. Haruto, you stop standing around and escort her properly!” Satsuki jabbed her finger at Rio and urged him to get moving.

Rio nodded. “May I be so bold as to ask for the honor of having a dance with Your Highness?”

“Of course, it would be my pleasure.” Charlotte nodded cutely.

“…Hey, Miharu, shall we also…”

“Miharu.”

Takahisa had just resolved himself to ask Miharu for a dance when Satsuki’s voice cut clearly through his speech, drowning him out.

“Yes, what?” Miharu cocked her head at Satsuki.

“There’s something I want to talk to you about—alone. Can we do it while Haruto and Char are dancing? Preferably somewhere where we won’t be disturbed.” Satsuki requested

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a moment to talk to Miharu alone.

“I don’t mind, but…” Miharu nodded her head as she looked at Satsuki’s face.

“Really? Then I’ll be borrowing Miharu for a moment, Takahisa.”

“…Right.” Although Takahisa’s mouth twisted slightly, he managed to muster a smile and nod. Satsuki immediately departed with Miharu in tow. Rio shot a somewhat conflicted glance at their departing backs.

“Oh no, that won’t do, Sir Haruto. You’re about to dance with me, so you should only look at me right now.” Charlotte didn’t let the slightest look escape her notice, winding both her arms around Rio’s left arm and looking up at him with an adorable pout.

“Pardon my actions. I shall now escort you to the dance floor,” Rio said, offering his free right hand to Charlotte.

“It would be my delight.” Charlotte copied Rio’s movements, taking his hand.

“Ah, right. I didn’t dance these past two days either. Well, I guess this is another one of a hero’s duties. Shall we go for a spin?” Hiroaki dramatically announced.

“In that case, please go with Princess Flora.” Roanna urged.

“Sure thing. You’re up next, Roanna.” Hiroaki smirked with satisfaction.

“Sir Takahisa, would you like to dance with me?” Lilianna asked Takahisa, who was gazing after Miharu with a lingering attachment.

“R-Right. Yeah, okay. Let’s go, Lily.” Takahisa snapped back to his senses and responded to the invitation with a forced smile.

“If all the other heroes are dancing with their princesses, it would be rude of me not to offer here. May I ask for one dance with you, Princess Christina?” said the hero affiliated with the main Beltrum Kingdom, Shigekura Rui.

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“Yes, of course,” Christina agreed with a friendly smile.

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After that, the heroes and princesses of each kingdom took to the dance floor, and the number of spectators increased further. Those who had been waiting for the next dance on the sides refrained from approaching, leaving only four pairs on the floor: Rio and Charlotte, Takahisa and Lilianna, Hiroaki and Flora, and Rui and Christina.

“Good grief, we’re not some exhibit on show.” Hiroaki looked around at the nobility surrounding the edge of the dance floor and gave an unruly smirk. However, whether Flora heard his statement or not, she kept Rio within her field of view as she got into position with Hiroaki.

Rio, in the meantime, had done just that with Charlotte. “Hehe. I wonder what Lady Satsuki and Lady Miharu are discussing right now?” Charlotte pressed her body close against Rio’s and looked up at his face, grinning as she questioned him.

“Not sure. Who knows?” Rio slowly tilted his head, giving a most natural response.

“Oh? You don’t know either, Sir Haruto?” Charlotte gazed at him teasingly.

“Yes. I haven’t heard anything from Lady Satsuki,” Rio replied immediately.

“But Lady Satsuki went to speak to Lady Miharu after she spoke to you, no? You were talking about something secret, hm?”

“Something secret, you say?” Charlotte’s observations were truly sharp, but Rio brushed them off with a poker face.

“Yes, something secret.” Charlotte beamed from ear to ear. Any healthy youth would have inadvertently felt their heart skip a beat at her adorable charm, but behind her age-fitting appearance was a glimpse of a hidden seductress.

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“I am unable to offer anything of use based on just that…” Just as Rio said that, the next dance song began. And so, Rio wrapped up the conversation there and started to lead Charlotte.

“There’s something reassuring about the way you lead,” Charlotte said, changing the subject.

“Thank you for the compliment.” Rio expressed his gratitude almost reflexively, waiting for Charlotte to elaborate.

“The reason why Lady Satsuki seems to have so much trust in you may be because of the sense of reassurance you give.”

“I… am not so sure of that. I believe a lot of the trust was because Miharu had been there…” Rio had a doubtful expression as he stepped smoothly.

“I don’t believe that. While the trust Lady Miharu has in you may have played a large part, whether you could win over Lady Satsuki’s trust from there is entirely reliant on your own personality, Sir Haruto. The close relationship that my brother Prince Michel spent several months establishing was accomplished by you in merely three days, after all.” Have confidence. That was the message Charlotte was clearly conveying.

“I’m honored,” Rio replied shortly.

“That’s why I’m almost envious, in a way. Because Lady Satsuki must surely have confessed things to you that she has yet to reveal to us. If I asked you to tell me what you and Lady Satsuki were discussing just now, would you?” Charlotte peered at Rio’s face, asking suggestively. She was probably trying to probe into what Satsuki was discussing with Rio and Miharu away from the eyes of the kingdom, Rio suspected.

“…Perhaps.”

“Hehe. It seems I’ve made you feel wary. I’m not asking you to inform me of what kind of discussions you’ve been

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having out of our view. I admit I am a little curious, but if I asked that of you, it would pretty much become an order. My insistence would only trouble you and anger Lady Satsuki," Charlotte said, revealing her intentions.

"...You're being very blunt about this." Regardless of where this topic suddenly came from, it was being discussed with very little reserve.

"Yes. I thought I had a fairly good understanding of what kind of person Lady Satsuki is during these last few months. And I knew that her thoughts were still preoccupied by her hometown. That's precisely why I am more than aware that she doesn't completely trust us, and now that Lady Miharu has appeared, I understand she has fears surrounding that too," Charlotte said with a truly suggestive tone, smiling impishly. What could she possibly want by talking about this? "That's why I believed it would be appropriate to explain our stance to you, as someone who rapidly grew closer to Lady Satsuki."

"..." While he had thoughts about that, Rio couldn't possibly question the princess himself, and he didn't want to interrupt her words either, so he remained silent as he waited for Charlotte's next words.

"To put it simply, we are fully aware of all of Lady Satsuki's fears and wish to form a favorable relationship despite them. Ideally, we want to be able to lay things bare between us, like how you and Lady Satsuki are right now. In order to accomplish that, we're willing to go through many lengths for her happiness," Charlotte declared brightly.

"Even if Lady Satsuki has to return to her own world one day? You wouldn't mind that?" Rio voiced the question at the core of the matter.

"Yes. That's why we want to form a solid trusting relationship earlier rather than later, in order to prepare for that moment. It's easy to put it in words, but the first step towards that is for there to be less wariness directed towards

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us. If there's any problems at hand, we'd prefer to hear it straightforwardly, as that would be much more helpful." The reason why Charlotte seemed so confident in her words was probably because there wasn't any way for Satsuki to return to Earth at present. That's why it was difficult to accept that the Galarc Kingdom would willingly send Satsuki off if such a situation were to occur for real.

That being said, it certainly seemed true that they wanted to form a favorable relationship with Satsuki. With the legitimacy of the Galarc Kingdom's throne founded by the authority of the Six Wise Gods, they would naturally want to keep Satsuki by all possible means, as a hero was an embodiment of the gods' might. This could be seen in the treatment from the Galarc Kingdom's side from the moment they arrived in this kingdom until now.

At the very least, as long as Satsuki doesn't express a desire to affiliate herself with another kingdom, they won't do anything openly to lose her trust, and they won't threaten her to stay with the kingdom either, huh? Since she went out of her way to mention Miharu, it doesn't seem like she has any intention of using Miharu as a hostage for negotiations at the moment, either. As she was declaring this out loud, it seemed like she had no intention of overturning that stance and losing Satsuki's trust as long as they could form a favorable relationship.

"I think that's a very reasonable and constructive approach, but what do you want me to do about it?" After all, Rio believed these words should have been directed at Satsuki, not him.

"Nothing in particular. I would be delighted if you could casually mention this to Lady Satsuki, as you are in a much more favorable position in her eyes, but I shall leave it to your own judgment." Instead of having a Galarc person pass on the message, if it came from Rio, Satsuki was more likely to be convinced. Rio thought for a moment, before closing

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his eyes and nodding.

“…I understand. I shall pass on the message.”

“Thank you very much,” Charlotte said happily, pulling Rio’s body closer as though hugging him. Then, she brought her face close to Rio’s cheek and ear.

“By the way, I think very favorably of you, too. Not as a princess, but personally,” she whispered. When Charlotte closed in on Rio’s cheek, the sound of people gasping echoed around them noisily. That being said, it didn’t have as much impact as when Satsuki had closed in like she was going for a kiss earlier, and she soon backed her face away, so the attention only lasted for a moment.

“…Thank you for the kind words.” Rio sighed lightly, showing a glimpse of his mental fatigue.

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Meanwhile, Miharu and Satsuki slipped out of the banquet hall to stop by a balcony that was being used as a resting area. There were five security guards beside the door that connected to the venue, but other than that it was deserted.

The night was a little chilly, and with the heroes and royalty of multiple kingdoms in attendance, the banquet was the perfect event to form personal connections, assuring that no one would visit such an isolated place.

“I spoke to Haruto. I asked why he thought you were better off away from him. He really is helpless, isn’t he? And so stubborn.” Satsuki sighed tiredly.

“…Umm.” Miharu blinked. What had they talked about? She was a little curious, but too scared to ask, leaving her at a loss for words.

“He said there were things that would always be incompatible between you two, because he was born here while you were born in Japan. He thinks you would be better

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off thinking of him as a different person, because he cannot be the Amakawa Haruto that you seek.” Satsuki pouted, her words tinted with faint anger.

“…” Miharu remained silent, biting her lip.

“Miharu, you told Haruto you wanted to stay with him before he revealed his past, right? Do you still feel the same?” Satsuki asked, watching her carefully.

“…Yes.” Miharu thought for a long moment before nodding, forcing the words out. Her desire to stay with Haruto was still true. Satsuki thought she was worried.

“Then, let me ask you one thing. Is the person you want to be with the man that used to be Amakawa Haruto? Or is it the man he is now?” Satsuki asked, looking straight at Miharu.

“That’s…” Miharu’s eyes darted around with uncertainty.

“You don’t know your own feelings?” Satsuki looked at Miharu with a gentle expression.

“I know. But I’m not sure whether it’s right…” Miharu said softly.

“…What do you mean?” Satsuki tilted her head curiously.

“It’s… both. The Haru-kun I know, and the current Haruto. I can’t think of them as separate people. But that would mean I’m seeking Haru-kun from Haruto, and Haruto says that’s impossible for him…” Miharu said in a stiff voice, as though she was swallowing something bitter.

“…Pff— Hehehe, ahahaha. I see.” Satsuki’s eyes widened in surprise before she burst into laughter.

“W-What are you laughing at?” Miharu asked in a fluster, wondering if she said anything weird.

“I’m sorry. It was just a little different to what I was expecting. You took me by surprise.”

“What you… were expecting?”

“Well, you decided to stay with the current Haruto without knowing anything about his situation, right? So I figured you made your choice from the start, whether

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Haruto was Amakawa Haruto in his past life or not. But, I see now. I had split them two into separate people, but to you, he's the same person, huh? Yup, I think that's really good for you. You should have confidence in yourself and tell him."

To Miharu, the current Rio was both her childhood friend Amakawa Haruto and the Haruto who saved her in this world. That was all there was to it. With that, all of Satsuki's worries had cleared up. She beamed brightly at Miharu.

"...Are you sure? Wouldn't seeking the Haru-kun I know from the current Haruto be forcing my own selfishness onto him...?" Rio had made it clear that he wouldn't be able to respond to Miharu as Amakawa Haruto. And so, wouldn't it only torment Rio for Miharu to continue to seek Amakawa Haruto from him? That was the fear Miharu held.

Because of that, she wondered if the right thing to do was to see the current Rio and Amakawa Haruto as separate people and tell Rio she still wants to stay anyway.

"What's wrong with that? That much selfishness is fine. You're prepared to accept every side of him you see from here on as both the current him and Amakawa Haruto, aren't you? Without comparing the two."

"...Yes." Miharu nodded with determination.

"Then you shouldn't hold back. You need to show him clearly that his fears are all unfounded." Satsuki pointed sharply at Miharu.

"Okay..." Miharu nodded with a gentle smile.

That's right. Ai-chan told me the same thing. I have to tell Haruto that I want to stay with him clearly, because Haruto is a very kind, but very cowardly person... She recalled the conversation she had with Aishia before. Miharu wasn't able to connect with Aishia telepathically on her end —she needed Aishia to connect them first. Satsuki was still unaware of Aishia's identity as a spirit and there were practically no opportunities for Aishia to materialize in the

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castle, so they hadn't had any chance to talk these last few days despite being in close range. Still, Miharu wanted to talk with Aishia once more, properly.

"I'll try to talk to Haruto one more time, and make myself clear. I'll tell him what I feel," Miharu decided.

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After Rio finished dancing with Charlotte, they retreated from the dance floor with the other three pairs.

"Oh, that's right, I had something I wanted to ask you," Shigekura Rui said as he approached Rio.

"Sure, what is it?" Rio replied in a casual tone.

"It's about your family name—Amakawa. It sounds very similar to the language of our former homeland. You said it was a word used in the land of your parents, right? Do you know where that is exactly?" Rui asked out of curiosity. Their conversation reached Hiroaki and Takahisa, who listened in out of interest as well.

"Do you know of a land called the Yagumo region, located to the far east of here? I was told that my parents were born and raised there." Rio didn't bother to hide any particular information, answering honestly.

"Yagumo... If I recall correctly, to the east of the Strahl region is a vast area of wilderness. Yagumo is the land located even further beyond there, I believe. I see... I thought the word 'Yagumo' had a Japanese sound to it, too. So that's where your parents are from," Rui noted, displaying his extensive knowledge in his understanding.

"You've heard of it?" asked Rio.

"Such a place exists?" Apparently this was new knowledge to Takahisa.

"Ah, that's another common trope used in other world fantasies. Anyway, I've heard of that place myself before and it caught my interest a little. Wasn't it some remote

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backcountry that didn't even have proper diplomatic relations?" Hiroaki joined the conversation too, his interest piqued.

"Actually, as the easternmost point of the Strahl region, our Galarc Kingdom formally communicated with a place in Yagumo named Rokuren via emissary for a few decades," Charlotte said, in reference to the diplomatic relations between kingdoms.

Rokuren...? Rio reacted quietly. That was the kingdom that once quarreled with the Karasuki Kingdom that Rio's grandparents governed, causing his parents to leave their homeland.

"However, the trip has to be made on foot, so you don't go there with the expectation to return, there's no estimate of how long it takes, and there's nothing to be gained, so it was deemed to be a risk with no return and abolished from my grandfather's generation. There hadn't been any records of an emissary from Rokuren for a hundred years at that point." Because there was no way to confirm if the emissary had arrived safely or not, there was a high chance the Rokuren Kingdom deemed the trip to be futile as well.

"Couldn't you just make the trip by enchanted ship? Or by the sea?" Takahisa wondered out loud.

"Traveling by air would require a tremendous amount of magic essence to move the enchanted ship, more than could ever be supplied. Sea travel is hindered by dangerous beasts in the waters, so there's no realistic route. The Wilderness is filled with dangerous animals from demi-dragons to wild beasts, so while it is a dangerous path to take, it's several times better than the other options," Christina added to the conversation.

"The scariest part of the sea route is the gigantic demi-dragon called the Sea Serpent. Our kingdom is surrounded by the sea, so our fishing industry is prosperous, but it is said that every year we lose several ships to it," Lilianna

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informed Takahisa of the dangers lurking in the sea route. Her statement was hearsay, naturally, because the sunken ships didn't return.

"...Haha. It doesn't seem like there are any realistic routes to the Yagumo region, then," Takahisa accepted with a twitching smile.

"Well, it is considered an act of suicide. The fact your parents made it here is impressive." Hiroaki said to Rio, giving a small shrug.

"I agree. I heard about the Yagumo region from them when I was young, and at the time I didn't think of it as any more than a faraway place," Rio said.

"Oh, Lady Satsuki and Lady Miharu have returned," Charlotte noticed. Once Satsuki came within earshot, she looked around at everyone.

"What is everyone gathered around for? Discussing something?"

"We were talking about how Sir Haruto's parents came from the Yagumo region and the family name 'Amakawa.' Apparently, it sounds similar to the language of the world where the heroes have come from," Charlotte summarized.

"Ah..." Satsuki murmured and looked at the faces of the heroes from Earth. It seemed like Rio had been able to skillfully evade the connotation of his family name by using the Yagumo region. They didn't seem to suspect him in any way.

"I'm a little curious about what kind of place the Yagumo region is and what the people are like. It's possible that Japanese people like us were summoned to this world in the past and developed civilizations in the far east," Rui said, looking around at the other heroes. It was an absurd thought, but as people who had come from Earth themselves, it wasn't an entirely unfounded thought to have.

"However, there's no way of confirming that at present. It's a land irrelevant to our summoning, probably. There's

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no telling if it's worth risking the danger to go there and confirm," Hiroaki agreed with a thoughtful hum.

"Sakata is surprisingly realistic in his way of thinking," Rui chuckled in amusement.

"Wha? And you're just a daydreaming romanticist, huh?" He seemed to have touched a nerve, as Hiroaki replied with sarcastic spite.

"Hmm, I wonder?" Rui brushed him off calmly. Satsuki watched the two of them in exasperation as the air developed into something more hostile.

"Haruto, how about you dance with Miharu?" she suddenly said to Rio and Miharu. Miharu flinched.

"...Sure."

"Ah! Miharu, will you dance with me too?" Takahisa gasped, overlapping Rio's words with his own.

"Sir Takahisa is a hero and it wouldn't be a good look to have his partner leave him behind and dance first, so perhaps Sir Takahisa should have the first dance here," Charlotte immediately suggested with a giggle.

"...That is true. Then I shall have a turn later." Rio read the situation and responded accordingly. With Charlotte's suggestion being the most socially-appropriate course of action, there was no room for objection anyway.

Miharu seemed to understand that, too, as she remained silent, biting down on her lip. It was as though cold water had been poured over the situation.

I hope you understand, Haruto. You have to dance with Miharu later. Satsuki didn't say anything out loud, glaring at Rio instead. He smiled awkwardly when he felt Satsuki's gaze on him.

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After their chat, Takahisa led Miharu to the dance floor with glee.

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“We shouldn’t wait here in everyone else’s way, so let’s watch the dances elsewhere,” Charlotte suggested to Rio and Satsuki. They attracted the attention of the attendees talking with each other on the first floor of the hall as they walked a short distance away from the waiting area of the dance floor. They came across Liselotte who was on the receiving end of attention from numerous noblemen. Charlotte called out to her cheerfully.

“Hey, Liselotte.”

“Hello, Princess Charlotte. And Lady Satsuki and Sir Haruto, too,” Liselotte replied with a gentle smile. The noblemen seemed to understand the situation and scattered like insects. They didn’t have the courage to rudely remain in the presence of not only a hero and the princess, but the man who was announced as an honorary knight at this very banquet.

“I see you are without a partner, as usual. At least you had Sir Haruto on the first night… Isn’t that why you’re being approached by so many gentlemen? They asked you for a dance too, I’m sure.” Charlotte looked around at the noblemen watching from a distance and spoke in a faintly exasperated voice.

“Ahaha, I wonder,” Liselotte replied awkwardly.

“That’s right. This is a good opportunity—why don’t you dance with Sir Haruto for one song? You’ve been entertaining so many nobles that you haven’t had the time for a dance yet, have you? Lady Satsuki and I took over as Sir Haruto’s partner for the second and third nights, after all,” Charlotte said out of consideration for Liselotte, looking at Rio to implicitly suggest he ask her for a dance.

“If Lady Liselotte is willing, then it would be my pleasure,” Rio said, following Charlotte’s lead.

“Of course, I have no reason to refuse… but are you sure?” Liselotte looked questioningly at Satsuki.

“Of course. Char and I have already danced.” Though she

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nodded with a smile, Satsuki's voice was a bit resigned. She still seemed a little unhappy that Rio had passed his dance with Miharu onto Takahisa so easily earlier. That being said, Satsuki wasn't childish enough to lose sight of their surroundings and act obtrusively. On the surface, she had a cheerful smile.

"Then I would be happy to. I'll be in your care, Sir Haruto." Liselotte grinned happily and picked up the hem of her dress in both hands, acting shy and ladylike. Thus, following Satsuki and Charlotte, it was decided that Rio would dance with Liselotte, one of the few key figures of the Galarc Kingdom.

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Rio and Liselotte headed for the dance floor together, passing by Takahisa and Miharu just as the previous dance ended.

"Ah, Haruto." When Takahisa spotted Rio escorting Liselotte, he raised his right hand and called out to them. He looked as satisfied as he'd ever looked all day, probably because he had just finished dancing with Miharu. Meanwhile, contrary to Takahisa, Miharu's expression was a little gloomy.

"The two of you were gathering all the attention of the hall," Rio said to Takahisa.

"Haha, no way. Will you be dancing with that woman next? If I recall, we met on the second night... Liselotte, was it?"

"Yes. Have you heard of her?"

"She greeted me on the second night. Miharu also told me that Liselotte has been a great help to her." It seemed like they were acquainted.

"I'm sure you met many nobles, so I'm honored that you remember my name and face, Sir Takahisa," Liselotte

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giggled with a charming smile.

“Ahaha. For some reason, I’ve always been good at remembering girls. Oops, I shouldn’t hold you two up any longer. Let’s go, Miharu.” Takahisa’s face relaxed shyly before he quickly changed the topic and tried to leave with Miharu. However, Miharu didn’t move from her spot, instead addressing Rio.

“Umm, will you have time to talk later, Haruto?”

Rio paused for a faint moment, but nodded. “...Yes, of course. Let us go, Lady Liselotte.”

“Okay.” Liselotte nodded, heading with Rio to the dance floor.

“After Lady Satsuki and Princess Charlotte is Lady Liselotte, huh? If that isn’t the top selection of our kingdom’s beauties.”

“Hahaha, His Majesty certainly regards him very highly. He apparently spoke of Sir Amakawa with quite a bit of spunk.”

“It is most likely the dawn of the youngest honorary knight in history.”

The nobles beside Takahisa and Miharu were chatting amongst themselves. Miharu watched Rio depart with a frustrated expression as she listened in on their conversations.

“Come on, let’s go, Miharu.” Takahisa frowned slightly before inviting Miharu along with a bright tone.

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It was Rio and Liselotte’s turn to move to the hall’s dance floor. Rio offered his hand with a gentle expression, which Liselotte took by softly placing her hand over his. Then, the two of them both brought their bodies closer, making contact through their clothes.

The song began soon after, signaling the start of their

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elegant dance. Hands clasped together. Bodies pressed against each other. Feeling each other's warmth from the closest position in the world at this moment, they slowly traced their steps along the floor. Liselotte's skirt fluttered like a flower opening its petals.

Shortly after they began dancing, Liselotte giggled with a smile. "I never imagined I'd be blessed with a chance to dance with you when we first met."

"Me neither. There was actually something I wanted to discuss with you as quickly as possible, so it was fortunate we could get together like this."

"...Is it about your previous life and Lady Miharu?" The day Rio first brought Miharu to Liselotte's estate, Rio had told her how he was actually a university student named Amakawa Haruto in his past life, to which Liselotte had told him about how she had been a high school student named Minamoto Rikka. When Rio gave himself the family name Amakawa at the banquet, she probably had an idea of what was going on.

"Yes. I wanted to talk to her after the third night of the banquet, but by declaring that my family name is Amakawa, I told Miharu everything. About my past life, and about how I was reborn into this world before Miharu wandered into this world... Lady Liselotte, I asked you to stay quiet about me, so I wanted to thank you for that."

"All I did was stay quiet about your past life to Lady Miharu, so there's nothing to thank me for," Liselotte replied with a giggle.

"I'm sure I caused you trouble. When I first visited your mansion with Miharu, I promised to talk to you about my past life, under the condition that you waited until I told Miharu the truth." In reality, Liselotte would have been able to prepare a time to ask if she wanted to, but she had left it to Rio to make a move.

"Don't let it bother you. I was busy with the aftermath of

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the attack on Amande and managing the Ricca Guild, so I wasn't able to set aside time for us to talk either." Liselotte shook her head gracefully.

"I appreciate that," Rio said with a smile.

"There's one thing I'd like to ask. Why did you choose 'Amakawa' as your family name?" Liselotte suddenly asked.

"...Part of the reason is because 'Amakawa' feels the most fitting for the name Haruto, but I also believed I could corner myself by doing that. That if I named myself that, I wouldn't be able to turn back anymore."

"Umm, what kind of relationship did you have with Lady Miharu in your past life?" Liselotte asked nervously.

"We had been childhood friends since we were babies. Although we were separated when we were 7 because I moved away, I managed to get into the same high school as her by chance, but Miharu wandered into this world on the day of the entrance ceremony... We never met again before I died in my second year of university," Rio said a little stiffly, forcing the bitter memory out.

"Is that... so..." A faint light of surprise beamed in Liselotte's eyes.

"You said you were a high school student called Minamoto Rikka in your past life, right? And that we never actually talked directly..." Rio inquired.

"Yes. The university you were attending had several affiliated high schools, if you recall. I was a student that went to one of the high schools on your campus." Amakawa Haruto's high school was also one of the affiliated high schools, and he had chosen to enter the university internally.

"Oh, that's why you were on the same bus, then. The bus stop was a little far from campus, so there weren't many people who used it." Maybe that was why he had left an impression on Rikka, Rio thought.

"Yes. Pretty much the only ones who used it at the same time as me were you and another girl in elementary school. I

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wonder if that girl was reborn into this world as well…” Rikka smiled nostalgically as she spoke of the elementary school girl riding the same bus—Latifa in her past life—with a faraway look in her eyes.

“…Are you curious about what happened to her?” asked Rio.

“Yes. We’ve never talked before, but that girl on the bus left a strangely strong impression on me…” Liselotte partially closed her eyes at the memory and peeked at Rio’s face.

Rio thought for a moment before speaking up. “…To tell you the truth, that girl was reborn in this world, too.”

“Really?” Liselotte’s eyes widened in surprise.

“I know where she is, and I can let you meet her if you’re interested. Would you like me to take you to her, as long as she agrees to it?” If they used a magic artifact, they could disguise her werebeast features.

“Yes, please,” Liselotte replied happily.

“But you really do have an impressive memory. You’ve remembered such minute details of your past life.” Rio could remember the events and people that had left strong impressions on him, too, but everything else he only remembered vaguely.

“We were riding the same bus so often, I unintentionally started observing you all. I noticed things like you all being in the same seats again one day, or he’s staring out the window again today, or she’s getting off at the same stop again today… I guess it just kind of burned itself into my memory over time.”

“I suppose I was the one who was staring out of the window,” Rio assumed in embarrassment, remembering that about himself.

“Yes,” Liselotte confirmed with a giggle. “By the way, what were you looking at?” she asked out of curiosity.

“Nothing in particular. There was nothing else to do while

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commuting, so.”

“Hehe, I see.” Liselotte seemed to find something funny about that, as she giggled again.

The sight of the two dancing elegantly as they exchanged amicable words caught everyone’s attention; perhaps because they were a beautiful couple, or perhaps because they were two figures who attracted attention either way.

While most of the spectators let out sighs of admiration at the graceful pair, Hiroaki didn’t seem amused to see Liselotte, whom he had taken a liking to, dancing with Rio, as his lips were pursed in discontent. Furthermore, Miharu and Satsuki were also among the spectators.

In the meantime, Rio and Liselotte continued chatting about the trivial aspects of their past lives. However, it didn’t last long; several minutes later, the song ended.

“I had a wonderful time. Thank you for inviting me to dance. If possible, would you be willing to talk about our past lives again some time?” Liselotte asked, smiling gently. She looked a little reluctant as she parted from Rio.

“Of course. When I think about how we may have never spoken to each other on Earth, I’m glad to have met you after being reborn here,” Rio replied with a kind expression.

“...Yeah.” Liselotte blinked before nodding at Rio radiantly.

“Now, shall we return?” Rio extended his hand to escort her. Liselotte took his hand softly and the two of them left the dance floor. She glanced at his side profile.

You might not remember me, but we actually met once when I was in middle school, Amakawa-senpai, she thought as she wore a graceful smile on her cheeks.

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After their dance, Rio accompanied Liselotte back to Satsuki. Charlotte had disappeared from beside her,

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replaced instead with Miharu, Takahisa, and Lilianna.

"Welcome back, Haruto. Liselotte, too. Your dance was lovely," Satsuki said, speaking on behalf of the group. Rio and Liselotte replied in unison.

"Thank you very much."

"I'm honored."

"Hey, Haruto. You know, right?" Satsuki asked brightly.

"Know… what?" Rio replied awkwardly, sensing an intensity that didn't warrant an argument.

"Don't play the fool." *Got it?* Satsuki implied coldly, looking at Miharu. She probably wanted him to invite Miharu for a dance, too.

Rio didn't have any reason not to ask Miharu for a dance in this situation, and it wasn't as though Miharu was absolutely refusing to dance, either. He started to invite Miharu for a dance, but at that moment—

"Sorry to interrupt, everyone!" a loud voice echoed across the hall. The nobles in the hall ceased their discussions and turned their gazes to the upper floor. The knight officiating the event was standing there.

"The end of the third night of the banquet draws near, but before His Majesty makes his greetings, we will conduct the official appointment ceremony for Sir Haruto Amakawa! Sir Amakawa and the heroes, if you would please return upstairs," the knight explained.

"What terrible timing…" Satsuki sighed in half exasperation, her shapely lips twisted in protest.

"Here you are, Lady Satsuki, Sir Haruto. I was looking for you." After disappearing without a word, Charlotte reappeared out of nowhere to address Rio and Satsuki in a bright tone. She proceeded to approach Rio and entwined her arms around his, acting self-indulgent.

"Hmph…" Satsuki watched Rio scornfully while loneliness filled Miharu's eyes. Charlotte showed no notice of their gazes as she pulled Rio's arm.

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“Come on, let us go. Father is waiting.” Her adorable mouth was faintly twisted with a delighted smile. In the end, the rest of the time was taken up by the induction ceremony of the honorary knight, leaving Rio and Miharu no time to dance together before the third night of the banquet ended.

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Chapter 3: Their Respective Feelings

After the banquet, Rio changed in the men's dressing room before meeting up with Satsuki and Miharu and returning to their rooms. Satsuki had been a little upset until the end of the banquet by how Miharu was the only one Rio didn't dance with, but Miharu insisted she was fine, since it was embarrassing anyway. Rio brought up what he'd spoken to Charlotte about during their dance, prompting Miharu to listen with a serious face.

"I see…" Satsuki placed a hand on her mouth in thought. To summarize Charlotte's statements:

It was understandable that Satsuki was wary of the Galarc Kingdom. The kingdom was also aware of why she would feel wary. However, they were hoping to form a trusting relationship in spite of that. If they were able to offer their support, they would provide it gladly. Even after Miharu appeared, they had no intention of taking her as a hostage against Satsuki, so she could rest assured with regards to that.

The Galarc Kingdom hadn't tried to interfere in order to keep Satsuki with them, so Satsuki had no choice but to accept the Galarc Kingdom's assistance while being wary of being used for political advantage. This had been their relationship until now, but…

The Galarc Kingdom had never referenced the fact Satsuki didn't quite trust them until now, either, though they must have suspected such a thing. Perhaps it was because they took it as implicit understanding, but they didn't

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aggressively pursue Satsuki to win her over.

"How do you see it, Haruto?" Satsuki asked.

"First, I believe that Princess Charlotte's words were most definitely the words of King Francois."

"…Right." If everything until now had been a lie, that itself would destroy Satsuki's trust.

"Incidentally, the Galarc Kingdom has told you before now that they wanted you to be affiliated to their kingdom and help them as their hero, right?"

"Yeah. But they haven't done anything more than that. They understood my wariness towards being their hero, so they've shown their consideration through their actions instead of words. As a result, I was treated as a temporary guest of the Galarc Kingdom, which created very positive conditions for myself…" Satsuki said, humming in thought.

"Recently the international situation has been changing incessantly, and now that Miharu and Takahisa—who you have been looking for—have shown up, the Galarc Kingdom must be looking to progress their relationship with you, don't you think? That's why they're crossing the line they haven't crossed until now. By putting their plan into words, they made it difficult to take contradictory actions, and the moment they do, they'd ruin the trust they've established completely. Looking at the Galarc Kingdom's attitude up until now and in the future, it seems like they're asking you to decide whether you'd like to approach them and make a compromise or not. As the administration of the kingdom, I think you just have to accept that they will have calculative intentions…" Rio advised Satsuki, giving his own assumption of the kingdom's intentions.

"…Yeah, I understand. Thanks for that."

"I didn't really say anything useful…"

"That's not true. You were a great help."

"…So what will you do?" Rio wanted to know how much she trusted the Galarc Kingdom and how far she was willing

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to walk with them in the future.

"...Well, it's true that they've looked after my living necessities for free without forcing me to do anything until now. They could just be deceiving me, but I think I can trust King Francois as long as our interests align with each other. I might have to go to him about Aki and Masato tomorrow, too... I don't plan on trusting him blindly, but I can compromise enough to repay the debts I owe them so far. It would be dishonorable to just go 'Okay, thanks! Bye!' now that I've found Miharu and the others." More than anything, it would be irresponsible.

"Also, well... I've been able to reunite with Miharu, and after speaking with Haruto about some things, I've given the future a bit of thought. This kingdom has Liselotte, too, and Haruto's become an honorary knight as well," Satsuki added in embarrassment.

"...It's just—and this could sound vain—but I believe it's possible His Majesty appointed me to an honorary knight in anticipation of you and me growing closer," Rio suddenly hypothesized. Having a close friend affiliated created a feeling of familiarity. He had a blind suspicion that such feelings may have been used against them.

They could have accomplished their goals by taking Miharu into their country, but if they insisted too hard on taking in a normal girl like Miharu, it could be interpreted as taking a hostage, which could become a source of distrust in the future.

In this regard, Rio at least had the strength not to be taken as a hostage, and was publicly given a position as a reward for defeating intruders at the banquet. Even if it had been with ulterior motives in mind, it could only be seen as a positive move.

"Ah, yeah. Maybe. If so, they really might be deceiving me," Satsuki agreed with a bittersweet smile.

"...It's a world I can't keep up with," Miharu muttered

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earnestly, her eyes wide. She watched Satsuki in awe for speaking to Rio at an equal level.

Just at that moment, there was a knock on the door.

"...I wonder who it is at this hour." Satsuki whipped her head around and looked at the door—the banquet was over and it was fairly late. It wouldn't be odd for people to be asleep already.

Satsuki stood up and approached the door. "...Yes? Who is it?" she called out to the door in a louder voice.

"Sir Takahisa and Princess Lilianna from the Centostella Kingdom have come to visit," the female knight guarding the room answered.

Satsuki opened the door and welcomed Takahisa with a surprised look. "Takahisa... What's wrong? It's kind of late."

"I pleaded with Lily to stay in Galarc for a little longer, but I was hoping to talk to you before you went to sleep..." Takahisa said nervously.

"I'm sorry. I tried to stop him since it was so late, but..." Lilianna added apologetically. Rio and Miharu were meant to sneak out of the castle after this to head for the stone house, but it was still early.

"We were about to sleep ourselves, but if it's just for a little while..." Satsuki shrugged, inviting Takahisa and Lilianna inside. They continued to chat over tea for another hour or so before Lilianna urged Takahisa to return to their rooms.

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Late that night, once it was too late to expect any more guests and the castle had quieted down, Rio departed for the stone house with Miharu.

"All right, see you later." Satsuki saw them off as Rio carried Miharu into the night sky. The two of them melted into the darkness in no time at all, making it difficult to

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follow them from the ground.

For the record, Aishia was already waiting at the stone house, so they were completely alone. But they did not speak for a while after they departed as they snuck through the skies above the castle.

“…Are you cold?” Rio finally asked.

“No, I’m fine. Haruto?” Miharu squeezed her hand in Rio’s clothes and nodded, before taking a deep breath and raising her head.

“…Yes?” Rio replied a little stiffly.

“I’ve been thinking ever since we had our talk. About who I wanted to be with.”

“Right,” Rio responded shortly, waiting for her to continue.

“The one I want to be with is you, Haruto. I want to be with you,” Miharu expressed in a strong tone.

“I… am not Amakawa Haruto,” Rio replied darkly.

“To me, you’re both Haruto and Haru-kun,” Miharu shook her head and stated bluntly.

“Amakawa Haruto is dead.”

“But Haru-kun is within you.” The normally-reserved Miharu refused to back down an inch.

“But right now, I am a person of this world. Even if I have Amakawa Haruto’s memories and values, those aren’t my memories and values. Do you still believe Amakawa Haruto is in me?” Rio didn’t back down, either.

“Yes.” Miharu didn’t hesitate at all, nodding firmly.

“…” Rio was completely taken by surprise. He wanted to dismiss her promptly, but the words didn’t come out.

“I want to be with both Haru-kun and the person that Haru-kun was reborn as,” Miharu repeated in objection, emphasizing that she definitely did not take Rio to be Amakawa Haruto.

“…What will you do if you stay with me? There’s nothing I can do for you. I’m living in order to fulfill my revenge.” Rio

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felt a pain in his chest, his voice coming out in a rare tremble. If Miharu had asked him to give up on his vengeance here, he may have given up.

"That doesn't matter to me. I want to stay anyway." When Rio tried to reject her through the reasoning that he was living in a shameful way, Miharu responded with her emotions. Even though she didn't know what that was, or what was waiting in the future…

"…You might regret it one day, when I turn out not to be the person you thought I was," Rio spat out.

"I will not. But I would definitely regret leaving your side," Miharu refuted with resolution.

"…" Rio's eyes trembled with hesitation. He didn't know what expression to make, his chest squeezing in pain. *Why? Why would she want to be with someone like me…* he asked himself.

"Or… would you prefer if I wasn't there? You have Ai-chan, Celia, Latifa, Sara, Orphia, Alma already… There are so many people around you supporting you, and I'm not even as smart as Satsuki. So if you don't want to have someone as powerless as me around…" Miharu asked Rio, expressing her anxieties.

"…That's not true," Rio denied in a bitter voice.

"Then do you think that way about everyone else? That they shouldn't be with you," Miharu's expression twisted and crumpled as she asked.

"…" Rio neither confirmed nor denied it. Miharu took that as a silent confirmation.

"Then why have you helped us out so much? Why did you save Celia, who was about to be married off against her will? Why did you adopt Latifa as your little sister?" Miharu raised her trembling voice. If he thought she would be better off away from him, then he shouldn't have saved her from the start.

However, Rio had saved Miharu and the others. He had

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allowed them to stay beside him. They had lived together. Was that nothing more than a temporary measure?

"..." Rio fell silent once more, furrowing his brows and averting his eyes. He wasn't able to come up with a logical answer.

"After looking after us so much, after becoming so familiar with us, living together like a family... there's no way I can accept you distancing yourself like that. That's so... selfish..." Miharu's voice trailed off weakly, which made it sound all the more like a scream to Rio.

However, Rio hadn't decided upon his revenge with half-hearted resolve, either. He was aware his path would be a bloody one, and prepared to go forward.

"..." He said nothing. He couldn't.

It's just like Ai-chan said... The Haruto of this world had shut his heart. That was what Aishia had told Miharu on the night she experienced the dream where Amakawa Haruto died. And now that Miharu was telling him her feelings like this, Rio was maintaining his negative stance.

He would most likely remain stubborn no matter what she said. Keenly experiencing Aishia's words coming to fruition, Miharu looked up at Rio's face with terrible sadness in her eyes.

However, Aishia had also said this: if Miharu really wanted to stay with Haruto in the future, then she couldn't run away.

That's why Miharu didn't give up. If she couldn't convince Haruto completely here, she would cling to him with everything she had.

"Haruto, when we came to the capital, you promised me on the deck of Liselotte's enchanted ship, right? That you'd respect my will."

"...Yes." It seemed like he still remembered. Rio nodded at a strange angle.

"I want to stay with you."

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“…”

“I want to stay. With you—with Haruto, with Haru-kun.” At Rio’s silence, Miharu simply repeated herself.

“…”

“Haru-kun,” she repeated again. Rio had a clearly bitter expression on his face when she called him by that nickname.

“…I understand,” he sighed, nodding.

“Thank you.” Miharu’s face brightened with happiness.

“There’s no need to rush into an answer, so take your time deciding. We’ll still be together for the time being,” Rio said, suggesting a compromise.

“Yup. Okay.” Miharu nodded with a plain, gentle smile. Rio watched her face, then looked away from the radiance.

“Also… Please stop with the Haru-kun,” he added with a sullen face. Even if she called him by that name, he wasn’t able to respond to her as Amakawa Haruto.

Roughly half an hour later, Rio and Miharu had arrived at the stone house and were seated facing Aki and Masato in the living room. The other residents were also present around them.

Over half a day had passed since Aishia had explained the circumstances to them—now, it was time to see if their resolutions stood firm.

“As you have heard from Aishia already, we’ve found Takahisa. He’s currently in the Galarc royal castle and knows you two are safe. He very much wanted to see you, but we first need to ask… what do the two of you want to do?” Rio asked, getting right to the point.

“I’ll go! I want to see my brother!” Aki looked at Rio and Miharu, answering immediately with no sign of hesitation. That was the answer they had expected. Rio proceeded to look at Masato for his answer.

“What about you, Masato?”

“Hmm… I want to see him, I think. Especially if he wants

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to see me.” Masato hummed as if he was considering his feelings one last time.

“Got it. Also, as we expected, Takahisa is saying that he wants custody over the two of you. What do you want to do about that?” Rio asked.

“I want to stay with my brother.” Aki still seemed to be faintly hesitant, as her eyes flickered to the ground as she answered.

“I… Like I said before, if it doesn’t seem like I can return easily, then I want to stay with you, Haruto. I still have to keep my promise with Arslan, and I need you to supervise my sword practice.” Masato didn’t seem to be absolutely certain of his answer either, as his voice was a little stiff.

“Takahisa is the hero of the Centostella Kingdom. You may have heard from Professor Celia already, but the kingdom is closed off and its internal affairs are unknown. It’s possible that if you follow Takahisa… we may not be able to meet again easily.” Rio looked at Celia, who was seated apart from them as she watched their conversation, as he gave his guess about what Masato was fearing. It was an explanation directed towards Aki.

“…” Aki seemed to have a few thoughts about that, as she pressed her lips together firmly.

“As for the Galarc Kingdom, they’ve so far maintained their stance against doing anything Satsuki would be opposed to. They made no move to take Miharu as a hostage or use their relationship with Satsuki, either. That being said, there’s no guarantee the same would apply for the Kingdom of Centostella, though it did seem like they were prioritizing Takahisa’s will over anything else. The rest we don’t know for sure,” Rio explained, looking at Aki and Masato again.

“All right, this is the last time I’ll ask. By going to meet with Takahisa, who is in the company of someone with power, you may be restraining your own freedom in the

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future. Things might not go your way, and you may even be treated unfairly. Despite that, the two of you want to go to the castle to see Takahisa. Is that correct?" he said carefully.

"…Yes."

"Yep."

Aki and Masato both gulped and nodded.

"Understood. Tomorrow—or rather, midday today—we'll bring the two of you to the castle. With that settled, there's something else I'd like to talk about…" Rio's mouth pulled into a tight line as he fixed his gaze on Aki. Aki cocked her head and looked back at him.

Unsure of where to start, Rio contemplated for a moment before he began to speak. "I'm going to tell everyone what I've been hiding. I've told Latifa, Professor Celia, and Miharu before, but it'll be news to Sara and the others—I have memories of my past life." First, Rio looked at the sofa in the corner of the living room where Sara, Orphia, and Alma sat together.

"Memories… of your past life?" The abrupt topic shift left Sara and the others widening their beautiful eyes. Beside them, Latifa's expression had also changed.

"Do you remember the meeting with the elders before I brought Miharu, Aki, and Masato to the village? Where the question of how I was able to teach the language of this world and whether I knew the language of their world came up?" Rio asked.

"Yes…" Sara and the others exchanged looks and nodded. At that time, they had sat in on the meeting between Rio and the elders, but Rio hadn't said why he knew the language of Miharu's world out loud. As a result, that had been in the corner of their minds this entire time, though they hadn't asked about it out of consideration.

"That was because I have the memories of a human who was born in the same world as Miharu and the others. I informed the elders when I first brought them to the village,

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but it was kind of hard to find the right time to tell everyone. I'm sorry this is coming about so late." Rio unfolded his hands from his lap and corrected his posture, bowing his head. Sara and Alma spoke first.

"No, there's no need to apologize."

"Yes, we understand there were circumstances at play."

"We should be thanking you for telling us, really," Orphia added with a smile, agreeing with the two of them. Rio nearly smiled with joy to hear that, but the truth he was about to reveal made him bite his lips instead.

"Thank you... And so, moving on to the main topic at hand, this is something I had kept hidden from even Miharu until just the other day..." Glancing once more at Aki, Rio's tone was a little evasive as he spoke. Imagining how Aki would react made him feel a bit scared, but he had to say it.

"Is it really something you should tell us, Rio? You don't have to force yourself for our sake." Celia seemed to see the shadow on Rio's face, and voiced her worry for him in a gentle voice. However, Rio had already made his decision and nodded before he began to speak again.

"This is tangentially related, but on the second night of the banquet, there was an incident where some intruders made it inside. I assisted with driving back the attackers and was appointed to the position of an honorary knight by the Galarc king."

"Did you just say... an honorary knight...?" The revelation left Celia, a former noble, horrified. However, it didn't seem to register for the others, who looked confused instead.

"Is that an impressive role?" Sara asked Celia curiously.

"Y-Yes. It's a prestigious title bestowed upon someone with remarkably outstanding military exploits and gives them a position with special rights, but no duty to the kingdom. They're seen as the same rank as counts and other high-ranked nobility, so rarely is anyone ever appointed..." Celia explained, staring closely at Rio.

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“Hmm… So in other words, Haruto became a noble of the Galarc Kingdom?” Masato asked curtly.

“Well, basically. It’s not like I’m serving the kingdom, so I don’t have to do anything in particular.”

“But what does becoming an honorary knight have to do with his past life?” Alma tilted her head to the side.

“I was allowed a family name upon my appointment as an honorary knight. Haruto was my name from my past life, but for several reasons, I made my family name the same as my past life as well.” As Rio spoke, Aki’s expression froze as she stared at him. Her heart thumped incessantly with a sense of foreboding.

“What was the family name, Onii-chan?” Latifa noticed the change in Aki’s expression at the same time as she guessed what was happening, so she interrupted with a question to connect the dots.

“Amakawa… Haruto Amakawa. That is my name as an honorable knight. It’s also the name I had in my past life, where I was Miharu’s childhood friend and Aki’s older brother.” Rio fixed his gaze on Aki and spoke to her solemnly. For a moment, everyone other than Aishia, Latifa and Miharu—who were already in the know—looked shocked.

In Aki’s case, her expression was completely wiped from her face. “…!” After a while, she clenched her teeth with a bitter face. At the same time, the others who were out of the loop all shouted out together.

“Whaaat?!”

“Uh? Eh? Wait, huh? H-Huuh?!” Masato’s mouth fell open, stunned. He looked between Rio and Miharu multiple times.

“Why…?” A bewildered expression appeared on Aki’s face as she spoke. Anger, confusion, and self-restraint—those three emotions swirled together in her chest. She tried to say something through it all, but each time she tried, she closed

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her eyes to suppress her fury.

“W-Wait a minute! I can’t keep up with what’s going on. First of all, I didn’t even know Aki had a brother before our parents married each other!” Masato didn’t seem to know anything about Aki from before the divorce.

“…I don’t.” Aki whispered.

“H-Huh? But…” But he was right there. With no idea as to what was going on, Masato looked at Rio and Miharu.

“She does. She does—Aki has an older brother named Haru-kun. As their childhood friend, I can testify to that.” Miharu had been holding her tongue so that Rio could explain things in his own words, but she interrupted him at this point.

“I do not! My older brother isn’t named Amakawa Haruto! He’s Sendo Takahisa! I’m Sendo Aki right now! I don’t know anyone who never contacted us, even when Mom was crying alone and fell ill from overwork!” Aki yelled back, her voice thick with emotion.

“Aki! Listen to what Haruto has to say. Haruto wasn’t—” Miharu objected to Aki in frustration, but was interrupted.

“It’s fine. It doesn’t change the fact that Amakawa Haruto never did anything brother-like for Aki. Now he’s dead, and I’m not Amakawa Haruto, so there’s no reason for me to act like an older brother now. I can’t say anything selfish like that,” Rio said, stopping Miharu calmly.

“…” Rather than dark clouds hanging over them, it was more like a sudden typhoon had struck the room, leaving the girls unrelated to the situation to watch in silence. They exchanged glances to check whether they should interrupt, but decided it was best to let their thoughts clash for a little longer.

“…Why, why are you revealing this now?! If only… If only I didn’t have to know… That you were that person!” She wanted to respect him as the person who saved her. She was happier being unaware of the truth. He should have just

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stayed silent about it—that's what Aki was silently expressing to Rio in her glare.

However, Rio stared at Aki quietly. He was objecting in return with his eyes and expression that there was a need for it.

"Because there was something I hadn't told you. Because I felt like it was something you should know. I had a feeling that you hated Amakawa Haruto, based on our time living together. That's why I knew you would get angry if I told you about my past life, but I also thought that I had to tell you properly."

"Something I should know?" Aki asked in a voice laced with anger.

"Yes. I've told you that Amakawa Haruto—my past life in my memories—died as a university student, right?" The moment the name was brought up, Aki grimaced, leaving Rio to clarify before continuing on.

"…" It was true—he had said that. Aki seemed to recall it, but she didn't nod.

"Miharu wandered into this world when she was fifteen, in her first year of high school. I was born the same year as her and died at the age of twenty-one, in the summer of my second year of university. However, even though I died later, I was reborn in this world before everyone wandered here. Don't you find that strange?" Rio explained.

"Ah…" Even Aki, whose blood was boiling, realized the abnormality in the timeline.

"When I entered high school, I returned to the town I grew up in to live alone. That was when I entered the same high school as Miharu and knew about the incident when Miharu went missing. Immediately after I turned twenty, I also visited my mother for the first time in thirteen years."

"You… met Mom? After we disappeared…" Aki's eyes were filled with surprise.

"Yeah. At the time, my father had hidden the

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circumstances from me so I didn't know you had gone missing as well, so I asked my mother whether you were doing well. And she told me you were doing fine…" Not all the facts surrounding this were clear, so Rio's voice was a little uncertain as he spoke. It was highly possible that his father was informed of Aki's disappearance, but hadn't passed that information on to Haruto.

"T-Then, does that mean we've returned to Earth in four years time?!" That was how Aki interpreted his line of thinking.

"…I don't know about that." Rio shook his head slowly.

"W-Why?"

"At the same time, I had asked if Miharu was still missing. So either Aki managed to return to Earth alone somehow, or my mother lied to me to prevent me from worrying…" Amakawa Haruto hadn't met with Aki at that time, and there was no confirming it now.

"…" Aki looked at Miharu pleadingly. She probably considered an option where she returned to Earth and Miharu didn't impossible.

"It's possible that you could return in four years' time, and it's possible that over four years will pass without you returning. I just wanted you to know that. That's why I had to tell you about my past life. This is all I have to say… If you have any questions, feel free to ask them," Rio said to a silent Aki. He thought about telling her the truth of their parents' divorce for a moment, but determined that there was no need at this time.

"…" Aki's expression turned sour when she looked at Rio's face, and she averted her gaze.

"Masato, if you have any questions, go ahead. I'm sorry for confusing everyone with this sudden topic. If there's anything you want to talk about, I'll talk," Rio said with a slightly bitter smile on his face.

"My head's completely blank right now, so I can't think of

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anything… Well, I'm surprised, but I'm not particularly angry or anything," Masato said, glancing at Aki. Celia and the other girls looked at each other, but didn't say anything.

"How about you take some time to think? We can't stay too late because we need to prepare for things in the morning, but there's still time until we have to return." Rio suggested, looking around at everyone's faces. At that, Aki stood up without a word and promptly left the living room for her own bedroom.

"I'll go talk to Aki alone," Miharu said, standing up quietly to follow Aki. Then, once the two of them were gone from the living room, Aishia and Latifa both stood up at the same time, approached Rio, and sat down on either side of him.

"My Onii-chan is still the Onii-chan in front of me right now," Latifa said, clinging to Rio's arm like a spoiled child.

"…Thank you." Rio smiled brightly. Aishia didn't say anything, but she did cuddle closer to Rio.

"Geez, these children…" There was no letting her guard down. Celia sighed in exasperation. "You shouldn't blame yourself too much. Also, don't burden yourself with all of this alone. That's a bad habit of yours. You were just bottling up all those feelings about Aki alone, weren't you?" she asked Rio.

"It was a problem I couldn't really talk about, so I figured it was hopeless." Rio looked up at the ceiling, having trouble finding a proper response.

"But if you're in pain, even if you can't say why, you can still, you know…" Celia's words trailed off in a mumble. He was allowed to depend on them. They could pat his head or hug him if he needed it.

"That's right. It's been years since we met, you know? Since we're living together, if you're in pain… there's something that can be done!" Sara was completely on board with Celia.

"Something?" Alma asked Sara with a huff of laughter.

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“S-Something, yes, something! Like having fun together,” Sara replied in a high-pitched voice.

“Like petting Rio’s head, for example?” Orphia offered.

“That’s right!” Sara nodded firmly.

“Like hugs?”

“Yep!”

“And offering your lap as a pillow?”

“Right— Wait, what are you trying to make me say?!” Sara nodded to gloss over her embarrassment, but when she realized the example Orphia brought up was even more embarrassing, she blushed.

“Hmm, Sara’s saying that, but I’d be happy to do it for you anytime. Just say the word, Rio. Right, Celia?” Orphia was feeling rather bold today.

“Huh…? Ah, well, yeah.” Celia’s cheeks reddened faintly as she gave a slight nod of her head.

“Me too, then.” Alma raised her hand.

“Then I’ll be spoiled tons by Onii-chan!” Latifa squeezed Rio’s arm even tighter. Aishia was still completely pressed up against Rio.

“I-I can do it too! If Rio asks for it!” Sara offered herself in a fluster.

“See? So many of us are worried about you. Since it’s come to this, you’ll just have to talk to us next time you’re worried about Miharu, about Aki—about anything. Leaving us out of the loop until the problem rises to the surface makes us feel like strangers,” Celia said to Rio on behalf of the group.

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“Ahaha…” Rio smiled with his eyes closed, not bothering to reply.

Meanwhile, Masato watched that exchange happen from the side. *Hmm. It doesn’t seem like the right time for me to interrupt. How nice it must be, Haruto. But I never imagined Aki would have a past like that…* He crossed his arms with a contemplative look and hummed.

“What’s wrong, Masato?” Rio brushed off his embarrassment by speaking to Masato.

“Nothing, I was just thinking that if you and Aki were siblings in your past life, then that kind of makes you my older brother as well, though we’re not related by blood. Aki may have said what she said, but I think of you like a real older brother.” Masato rubbed his nose shyly as he spoke to Rio.

“Oh. Thank you, Masato.” Rio’s eyes widened before he thanked Masato with a gentle smile.

“Hmph! It’s my job to be spoiled by Onii-chan, though. Got it, Masato?” Apparently that had fired up Latifa’s desire to monopolize her brother.

“Ahaha. I know. I’ll just have him look after my sword practice.” Masato shrugged with a laugh.

“Good.” Latifa nodded in satisfaction. “That aside—Onii-chan.” She suddenly looked up at Rio’s face.

“What is it?” Rio tilted his head in response to Latifa, a gentle expression on his features.

“I can smell the scent of women I don’t know on your body.” Rio froze as Latifa’s nose twitched as she sniffed. She was a werefox with sharp senses, after all. Sara the werewolf had also noticed, as she made a face that seemed to say: “Oh, she actually asked.”

“…Oh, that’s because I danced with lots of people at the banquet,” he answered shortly to Latifa, who looked up at him as though to ask who. At the back of Rio’s mind, he recalled how Charlotte had clung to him constantly all night.

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Meanwhile, Aki closed the door and entered her room before falling onto the bed. Moments later, the door opened once again as someone entered. The door clicked shut behind them. Because the house was made of stone, it was completely soundproof with the doors closed and no one outside could hear their conversation.

“…What is it, Miharu?” She knew who it was without turning to look.

“It’s about Haruto. Also, I feel like I have to apologize to you, Aki.”

“…You? What would you have to apologize for?” Aki asked, deciding to touch upon the latter topic first.

“I had no idea how to interact with you after you closed your heart off to Haru-kun, so I always ran away from it. I used the fact that our relationship might break down as an excuse, when in reality, I didn’t have the courage to face it head-on. Even though I’m like your older sister… I’m sorry,” Miharu said in shame. The more prejudice Aki held towards Haruto, the more strongly Miharu felt aware of how precious Haruto was to her. However, Miharu had never been able to confront those feelings with Aki.

She had been worried that confronting Aki would have ruined their relationship. However, if she had confronted her, then she may have been able to shed some positive light on those ill feelings. Instead, her avoidance had resulted in making Aki even more upset now, Miharu thought.

“That’s not… true. Even after that person disappeared, you were the one always by my side. You didn’t run away at all. You stayed with me. So, don’t apologize. What are you apologizing for? There’s nothing to be sorry about!” Despite being on the verge of tears, Aki mustered a smile and poured her heart out.

“No, I have to apologize. I will no longer run away,”

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Miharu said resolutely.

“Huh…? No longer run away?” Aki asked in a tearful voice.

“Yup. I’ve decided I’ll voice my own opinions from now on. Until now, I’ve always yielded to you whenever my opinion utterly clashed with yours. But I’ve realized that doing so wasn’t benefiting you, and most of all, it wasn’t benefiting me, either.”

“Uh…” Aki bit down on her lip so hard she nearly drew blood.

“Do you hate this Haruto, Aki?”

“…The one I hate is Amakawa Haruto.”

“Those are illogical emotions. You know that yourself, don’t you? That Haru-kun was just a child like us at the time. If anything, he tried to return to us when he entered high school,” Miharu said, expressing the feelings she had kept pent up until now to Aki.

“…” Aki fell silent, her expression bitter.

“But that means you don’t hate Haruto, then…” Miharu said, sounding slightly relieved.

“…I don’t know,” Aki muttered.

“You don’t know?” Miharu asked carefully.

“Haruto is our savior, and I’ve respected him until now as a wonderful person, so I can’t hate him. But I hate Amakawa Haruto. That’s why I don’t know what to do… Whether I like him or hate him, I just don’t know. That’s right—it’s illogical! I’m illogical! But I can’t help it! Even the mention of his name pisses me off!” Anger rose in Aki as she spoke, causing her to start yelling.

“Aki…” Miharu’s face clouded over with sadness.

“I’m sorry. Please leave. I don’t think I can speak calmly even to you right now,” Aki spat out in a prickly tone, as though she was suppressing the simmering rage within her.

“…” Miharu had said what she needed to say, but she gave pause anyway, wondering if there was something more she

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could say.

"Get out, please!" Aki yelled, her anger exploding.

"Will you talk to me again after you've calmed down?" Miharu asked softly but firmly.

"Fine!" Aki's response was near-hysterical. Without saying another word, Miharu turned on her heel and left the room.

"I want to see you soon, brother..." Aki muttered to herself sorrowfully once she was alone.

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The first thing Miharu saw after leaving Aki's room and returning to the living room was Rio being pressed against Aishia and Latifa, who was sniffing his body as she clung to him.

Miharu's eyes widened in shock. It was the usual warm, pleasant scene of their daily lives. However, it was a scene she couldn't see while they were at the castle. Even though they had only stayed in the castle for a few days, she had missed seeing this so much.

Ah, if I lived apart from Haruto, I wouldn't be able to see this anymore, either... Miharu watched the ordinary scene unfold before her, cherishing the sight of it. Her mind had been so occupied with the problem between Rio and Aki, she had forgotten how precious everyone here was to her, too.

She knew that, realistically, it would be difficult to stay with everyone forever. But she didn't want to lose the life she had here. Miharu felt strongly about it.

"Miharu, are you done already?" Sara noticed Miharu standing at the edge of the living room and walked up to her.

"Yeah. What was that commotion out here?" Miharu watched Rio and the others with a smile.

"Latifa suddenly brought up how the scent of unknown women was hanging on Rio's body. According to Rio, they

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were just his dance partners at the banquet," Sara sighed tiredly.

"Ahaha. If it's an unfamiliar scent, it might be Princess Charlotte's. She was sticking fairly close to Haruto the whole night..." Miharu remembered how she hadn't been able to dance with Rio at the banquet and smiled a little sadly.

"I see. More importantly, this is something everyone told Rio just now, but we'll always be here to listen to your worries. Don't be a stranger and lean on us, too. We're a family, after all." Sara made use of all her natural leadership to appear dignified and reliable to Miharu.

"...Yeah. Thank you." Miharu broke into a happy smile, nodding obediently.

"Good. Now, shall we go back?"

"Yup," Miharu replied. Sara brought her to the middle of the living room.

"Miharu, Sara, come sit here." As usual, Orphia took the initiative to beckon them into seats nearby. Having just had that exchange earlier, they were feeling strangely conscious of each other, so they were very grateful to carry on without worry or awkwardness. A normal interaction—it was a very precious thing.

Then, once Miharu and Sara sat down—

"Miharu, how did it go with Aki?" Rio asked. He must have been worried. Whether that worry came from Haruto, or whether it came from Haru-kun, Miharu still didn't know...

"...Right. I said what I had to say, but her heart hasn't adjusted to it all yet, so she'll talk to me after she calms down. I'll try to talk to her again later, too." The issue would be solved one day for sure, Miharu decided as she informed Rio of Aki's state. Rio gave a slightly weak smile as he bowed his head at Miharu.

"...I understand. Thank you."

After that, they discussed how they would bring Aki and

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Masato to the castle the next day. Aki refused to look at or talk to Rio, up until Rio and Miharu returned to the castle.

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Chapter 4: A Family Reunion

The next day, Rio followed the plan they had arranged the night before and received permission to leave the castle in the morning. Aishia and the other girls had brought Aki and Masato to the capital already, but they couldn't go to the castle quite yet.

The purpose of Rio's outing was to create a cover story for King Francois, to prove that he had met with Aki and Masato to confirm their intentions. They couldn't possibly give him the explanation that they had snuck out of the castle at night to meet in secret already, after all. Rio spent two hours outside of the castle before returning to finally set things in motion with Satsuki and Miharu.

After requesting an audience with King Francois in one of the castle's drawing rooms, they told him there were people they wanted to invite to the castle. Takahisa and Lilianna were also summoned to the room, and Michel and Charlotte were present as well. Satsuki took the lead on explaining, being that she was the hero.

She spoke of how Rio had been looking after Aki and Masato together with Miharu, about how they wanted to see Takahisa, and as a result, they wished to summon the two of them to the castle. They weren't brought to the castle in the first place because the two of them were too young to attend the banquet.

"I understand. You may invite them to the castle immediately. If they are Sir Takahisa's siblings, then I presume it would be fine for them to lodge in your quarters?" Francois approved once Satsuki had explained everything to a rough degree.

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“Yes!” Takahisa nodded eagerly, and so it was decided that Aki and Masato would be brought to the castle. After that, Rio left the castle in the company of an official and headed straight for Aki and Masato. Miharu went with him, after offering to go as well.

They went to the meet-up location they had decided on beforehand and safely brought Aki and Masato back to the castle, then headed straight for the drawing room they’d occupied before.

“Takahisa!” Aki yelled in delight as soon as she entered the room and spotted him. Masato stood right behind her with a shy smile on his face.

“Aki! Masato!” Takahisa jumped out of the chair he was sitting in and ran towards the two of them, overcome with emotion.

“It’s you! I can’t believe it’s you!” Aki dashed forward to hug him. Takahisa opened his arms to catch her.

“Aki! I’m so glad you’re safe, seriously…!” Takahisa squeezed her tightly.

“Ahaha, that hurts,” Aki said, though she was hugging her brother just as strongly.

“Oops, sorry.” Takahisa reflexively tried to loosen his hold.

“Nope, this time it’s my turn. Hehe… it’s really you.” Aki squeezed her arms even tighter. She buried her face in Takahisa’s chest. Even a normally cool-headed girl like her had a childish side.

“How have you been, Aki? I, uhh… heard you were nearly made into a slave…”

“Yup, I’ve been good. Haruto… He saved me,” Aki replied with a shadow over her smile. She almost looked at Rio, but stopped herself partway.

“I see. Well, you’re safe now—I’ll protect you.”

“…Yeah.” Aki nodded vaguely. Seeing her unhappy expression made Takahisa’s face cloud over with frustration.

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He bit down on his lip and looked at Rio.

"...Umm. Thank you very much, Haruto. For protecting the three of them. Really."

"Not a problem," Rio replied shortly, shaking his head.

"How have you been, Masato? Come closer—show me your face," Takahisa said to Masato, who was standing a distance away.

"I'm fine. Don't be embarrassing about it," Masato replied awkwardly.

"You've grown so much in our short time apart," Takahisa said in a brotherly way.

"Really? Well, I'm still growing," Masato huffed shyly and looked at his own limbs.

"You siblings get along so well. But I really am glad the five of us could reunite like this safely. Long time no see, Aki, Masato." Satsuki had been watching the family reunion warmly until now, when she decided to address them. Only Rio, Miharu, and the two siblings involved knew that Satsuki had snuck out of the castle to go see them before the banquet, so she needed to pretend she was meeting them again for the first time.

"Long time no see, Satsuki," Aki said.

"Yeah, it's good to see you're safe as well," Masato chimed in. They gave their replies as they had planned—as though they were meeting again for the first time.

"If you have all been reunited safely, then we shall take our leave. It would be impolite for us to intrude on such a long-awaited reunion," Francois said, looking at Lilianna.

"Yes. We shall give our proper greetings at a later time," Lilianna agreed immediately.

"If you don't mind, Sir Haruto, could you please accompany me?" Charlotte suddenly asked Rio.

"Of course." With no reason to refuse the request of a princess, Rio nodded readily. Thus, everyone other than the five people from Earth left the room. The door clicked shut,

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leaving the five of them alone.

“How about we all sit down first? Miharu, you can sit next to me,” Satsuki suggested.

“Right.” Takahisa nodded happily, guiding Aki to the sofa for them to sit together. Masato sat down on a sofa a slight distance away, while Miharu seated herself beside Satsuki.

“I know we’ve finally reunited and are in high spirits, but we already have a general idea of each other’s circumstances and it’s quite difficult to find time for the five of us to be together, so how about we discuss the things that need to be said first?” Satsuki said, looking around at everyone’s faces.

“Sure. But what do we need to discuss?” Takahisa looked at Satsuki and cocked his head.

“The serious matter of our future. Everything’s really complicated right now, right? Neither Takahisa nor I can leave our kingdoms easily, and we’ll probably be separated again in the future. Looking at things in the long-term, shouldn’t we decide on what to do in order to return to Earth?” Satsuki said, summarizing the agenda succinctly.

“That’s true…” Takahisa nodded, glancing over at Miharu opposite him.

“There’s something you should know involving Haruto first. It’s heavily related to our future, too. I’ve received permission to tell you about it, but you have to keep what I’m about to say an absolute secret from anyone else. Can you promise me that?” Satsuki looked directly at Takahisa.

“If you’re talking to just me, then the others…” Takahisa looked around.

“They know already. If you can promise me you’ll keep it a secret, then I’ll tell you too. If you can’t make that promise, then I’ll just tell you the conclusion with the detailed explanation omitted, so keep that in mind. Just don’t ask the others to tell you, because they’ve promised already and would be troubled by that.” Satsuki’s explanation was so abstract, there was no way of telling what the matter was

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about. However, Takahisa didn't want to be the only one left out of the loop.

"…All right. I promise. Please tell me."

"Okay. To start with the conclusion… We may not be returning to Earth within the next four years." Satsuki stated.

"…Four years? How do you know that?" It was a strangely specific number.

"There's someone who died in Japan four years after we disappeared on our way home—and was reborn into this world. That person heard from your own mother that Miharu was still missing four years later."

"…What?" *What is going on?* Takahisa made a dubious face.

"That person is now Haruto, and he used to be Aki's older brother in his past life. His name was Amakawa Haruto. He was separated from Aki when his parents divorced. Masato wasn't aware of him, but perhaps you know of this, Takahisa…?" Satsuki asked, but Takahisa's eyes were completely blank with shock. The words being said were entering his head, but he couldn't quite accept them as reality so readily.

"Aki, you had an older brother other than me…?" Takahisa turned his head to the side, straining himself to ask Aki.

"I do not. You're the only brother I have right now. The only one…" Aki furrowed her brow and squeezed Takahisa's hand.

"As you can see, Aki has feelings of reservation towards Amakawa Haruto. This is just my speculation, but the reason why your parents didn't tell you two about Haruto's existence was probably related to that." Satsuki sighed quietly.

"Aki…" Takahisa squeezed Aki's hand back to reassure her.

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“Amakawa Haruto was also Miharu’s childhood friend. He was separated from her as well when his parents divorced when they were seven years old,” Satsuki continued.

“Miharu’s…?” Takahisa’s eyes widened as his expression stiffened.

“That’s right. Haruto is the reincarnation of my childhood friend.” Miharu verified Satsuki’s statement with a serious expression.

“Uh…” Takahisa paled as his heart throbbed unpleasantly. He didn’t understand why, but he couldn’t help but feel terrified that there was a part of Miharu he didn’t know about.

“Let’s get back to the topic at hand. According to Haruto’s memories, Aki’s mother said that Miharu was still missing. However, she also said that Aki was doing well when asked about her.”

“…Does that mean Aki returns to Earth while Miharu doesn’t?” That was ridiculous. Takahisa couldn’t believe that Aki and Miharu would be separated. He looked dubious.

“Yes. Whether this was a lie to prevent Haruto from worrying or whether it was the truth—and what this could mean if it was the truth—there’s just no way of knowing,” Satsuki said thoughtfully, a troubled shadow over her elegant face.

“…W-Wait a minute! I can’t believe Aki and Miharu would be separated. Was Haruto unaware of the fact that Aki had disappeared? If so, wouldn’t he know that Mom lied when she said Aki was doing well…?!” Takahisa insisted in a heated panic.

“…Haruto was unaware of the fact Aki had gone missing. After his parents divorced, Haruto’s father completely cut off any information about Aki and their mother from reaching him,” Satsuki replied, glancing at Aki for a moment. Aki’s mouth was twisted in a bitter frown at the mention of her father.

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“But… I just can’t believe it. There’s no way Aki and Miharu could’ve been separated. Couldn’t Mom have been lying to stop Haruto from worrying?” Takahisa said, this time causing Miharu to be the one to retain a bitter smile.

“…True, that’s another likely possibility. I find it hard to believe that Aki wouldn’t go and find the past Haruto once she returned to Earth, too…” Satsuki looked over at Aki. “At any rate, it doesn’t seem like we’ll be returning to Earth anytime soon. Reluctant as I am to admit, that’s practically been confirmed now. And so, we should have a proper discussion about how we’re going to live in this world from now on, instead of having just a vague idea. Wouldn’t you agree?”

“Yes,” Miharu nodded firmly in approval.

“To be honest, for me… I was pretty panicked until Haruto appeared with Miharu. I was lonely. I had wondered if Miharu and the others were also summoned into this world, but I had no proof, and I just wanted to go home as soon as possible. But you know, I’m more optimistic now. Everyone’s here. I’ve made a very reliable friend in Haruto. So I can’t remain pessimistic about this forever, you know? If we’re not going to be able to return for a while—or even ever—then I want to get a proper footing in this world and live a meaningful life.” Satsuki looked around at everyone as she gave her own thoughts.

“Until now, we’ve only discussed things vaguely. We wondered what we’d do if we met up with Satsuki and Takahisa. We all have our own thoughts on things, but we kind of ended up avoiding that discussion… But I think it’s something that should be discussed properly, now that the five of us have gathered,” Miharu stated her opinion clearly.

“Right. It may be impossible for the five of us to live together, but as long as we know we’re all safe, as long as we know we can see each other again… I think we’d be able to manage.” Satsuki nodded.

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“The five of us together, huh… True, with Satsuki as a hero of the Galarc Kingdom, it’d be difficult for her to live in the Centostella Kingdom.” Takahisa looked at Satsuki with a frown.

“Well, yeah…” Satsuki nodded awkwardly.

“…Are you going back to Centostella right away?” Aki tugged at Takahisa’s sleeve and asked.

“Yeah. I’ll probably be able to come out again, but I don’t think I can stay for long. That’s why I thought about what I wanted to do all night. I want everyone to come with me. I want to stay with you all forever. I’ll protect you. I’ll definitely protect you all.” Takahisa’s face was pulled into a tense expression to convey his determination as he looked at Aki, Masato, and finally—Miharu.

“I also want to stay with you…” Despite replying with that, there was a faint touch of hesitation in Aki’s voice. She did want to stay with Takahisa. However, she may have been troubled by whether it was okay to throw aside the bonds she had made living with the others in the stone house up until this point.

“Hmm…” Masato hummed. He seemed to be indecisive and unwilling to answer.

“I’m sorry. I won’t be going to Centostella Kingdom.” Miharu made her refusal loud and clear.

“W-Why…” Takahisa asked hoarsely.

“Because I intend on staying with Haruto…” Miharu replied immediately.

“Wha…” Takahisa made a face as though he had been shoved off a cliff. Speechless, he looked at Miharu imploringly, but she had nothing more to add.

Meanwhile, when Aki heard Miharu’s clear intention to stay with Haruto, her mouth twisted reflexively into a sullen frown.

“I also want to stay with Haruto, I think. I wavered a bit, having you in front of me, but I still want to stay with Haruto

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for now,” Masato stated.

“But why…” Takahisa was clearly enraged as he mumbled in a quiet voice.

“U-Umm! I want to stay with you!” Aki seemed to have heard Takahisa mumbling from her place beside him, as she hurriedly declared her own position.

“Aki…!” Takahisa’s expression brightened as though he had found an oasis in the desert.

“It’s not that I don’t want to stay with you, bro. It’s just… Haruto’s looked after us so much and I can’t imagine walking away just like ‘Okay, thanks, bye…’ I know you’re ignoring Haruto right now, but you understand how it feels too, right, Aki?” Masato asked her.

“…” Aki seemed unable to be as honest as Masato and held her tongue. However, that was the greatest proof that she felt the same way.

Was Haruto that big of an influence on Masato and Aki? They had only been separated for a few months… Takahisa fell into the illusion that his precious bonds were being stolen and clenched his fists tightly.

Masato sighed at Aki’s lack of a response and voiced his own thoughts once again. “Also, in my case, I have my sword training, too… I don’t want to lose my progress. That’s why I can’t go with you right now, bro. Not until I’ve grown up enough to stand on my own.”

“Sword training?! You— You’re learning how to use a sword?” It was a comment that couldn’t be ignored.

“I am…” Masato was slightly taken aback by Takahisa’s excessive reaction.

“Why are you learning it? It’s not fun and games. Swords are used to kill people in this world.” Since he was learning to use swords at the castle himself, he understood that fact well. Or rather—he was being made to learn it. That was why he showed such an extreme reaction to the knowledge that Masato was learning as well.

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“I know. Haruto’s teaching me everything. And if you know that much, that means you’re learning how to master the sword yourself, no?” Masato pointed out how hypocritical that was.

“It’s fine for me to. I’m already in high school, and I understand things. But you’re still in elementary school. Your sense of morals and ethics aren’t developed yet.”

“I understand things, too!”

“D-Don’t tell me you’ve actually killed someone before.” What if he had? Takahisa suddenly paled.

“No way! But there are monsters out there, and the world is what it is. I have to be able to protect us if anything bad ever happens. We were nearly abducted the moment we came to this world, after all,” Masato objected in a rough tone of voice.

“That’s why I’m saying I’ll protect you from now on. You won’t need to set foot anywhere dangerous of your own accord. As long as you stay in the castle, nothing bad will ever happen. It’s safe there.”

“I’m telling you, I’m not going with you! I don’t want to just sit there and be protected.”

“If you fight, you might end up getting killed! Ever think of that?!” Takahisa scolded him harshly.

“Haruto’s taught me that already!”

“Guh…” There was that name again. Haruto, Haruto, Haruto. He’d made his way inside of everyone’s head while Takahisa wasn’t around. Even though that place should have been for him…

“Calm down, you two. I know I said we should discuss things, but I didn’t say we should argue,” Satsuki interrupted in the time that Takahisa fell silent.

“I… I just don’t want Masato to live a dangerous life. It’s safe in the castle, and as for learning swordcraft… If he absolutely had to, he could learn properly from the knights in the castle,” Takahisa said sullenly.

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“Oh? Safety of the castle aside, Haruto’s an honorary knight himself, you know. He’s stronger than your average knight,” Satsuki noted.

“Exactly.” Masato nodded smugly.

“Masato, you have to try and understand how worried Takahisa is about you too, okay? Just imagining you running off somewhere and dying… anyone would feel uneasy,” Satsuki said to calm Masato, showing a smile with a bit of gloom to it. She had also been alone when she first came to this world, so perhaps that was why she could understand Takahisa’s feelings.

“Hmm… Well, yeah, I guess.” Masato nodded reluctantly.

“So, in conclusion… or rather, to summarize for now, Aki will be going to Centostella Kingdom with Takahisa, Miharu and Masato will stay with Haruto, and I’ll remain in the Galarc Kingdom—does that sound right?” Satsuki didn’t have any objection to the choices made as long as they were what the person in question decided for themselves, but it didn’t seem like Takahisa and Aki were as accepting. With that in mind, she looked at the two of them.

“…Are you okay with this, Aki? About leaving your ill feelings unaddressed and separating from Haruto like this,” Miharu asked her.

“…Who cares.” Aki averted her eyes from Miharu, giving an indifferent answer to hide her irritation.

“If you’re going to go with Takahisa, you should talk to him properly beforehand. Even if you’re going to move away from him, I hope you’d reconcile first.” Miharu placed a hand over her chest. At that, Aki ground her teeth and sneered in return.

“You’re completely on his side now, aren’t you? You’re not my ally anymore,” Aki replied sharply.

“…No. That’s wrong. I’ve always considered you special to me. You’re like my real little sister,” Miharu denied with great sadness.

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“Then why aren’t you coming with us?! Don’t go with him—come with me and my brother! Stay with me!” Aki yelled at Miharu in grief.

“I… can’t do that. I’m sorry.” Miharu looked extremely distraught, but nevertheless expressed her intentions.

“I-Is it because you love him, Miharu? Is it because you love him that you can’t stay with me? You’d choose him instead?” Aki’s voice shook terribly as she spoke.

“It’s not like that…” Miharu gasped in shock. She wanted to stay with Haruto, not Aki. That may indeed have been the meaning of her choice, but the nuance was completely wrong.

“…Aki. It might not be my place to say this, since I’ve only heard of what happened through other people—but don’t you think that was too much?” Satsuki had been watching quietly as an outsider, but even she couldn’t let this conversation go on any longer.

“That’s right, Aki,” Masato also agreed indignantly.

“Love…” When Takahisa heard the possibility of Miharu being in love with Haruto, he fell speechless. That shock gradually shifted into panic.

“W-What does Haruto think?!” Takahisa asked loudly. Think about what? The implication of his question was too broad.

“…He says he’ll entrust the matter of who stays with who up to Miharu and the others themselves. He didn’t seem too enthusiastic about the thought of Miharu following him, though,” Satsuki replied.

“…That part is settled now. We talked it out, and I asked him. While he’s still reluctant about it, he accepted it.” Miharu looked at Satsuki and nodded.

“There you have it.” Satsuki smiled with a huff and looked at Takahisa. “Well done, Miharu. Though the fact that Haruto’s still reluctant is a little…” She sighed tiredly. Miharu simply smiled shyly.

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“T-Then Haruto can just go with you…” Takahisa said in a great panic.

“…That’s not possible. Haruto has things he needs to do, too.” Recalling what Rio was trying to do, Satsuki’s face clouded over a bit.

“I-Is that the reason why he’s reluctant to bring Miharu along, perhaps?” When it came to the topic of Miharu, Takahisa had sharp instincts. His comment was right on the mark.

“Well, you could say that…” Satsuki nodded begrudgingly. Takahisa saw his chance in that and gulped before speaking.

“If Haruto doesn’t want you to follow him, wouldn’t forcing him to take you along just cause him trouble?”

“…You might be right. But I think that’s fine, too. He’s trying to live apart from a path of peace, so he needs someone beside him to pull him back into a regular life,” Satsuki said wearily, a knowing look on her face.

“He’s trying to live a turbulent life?” Unaware of the circumstances, Takahisa and the others cocked their heads dubiously.

“Hmm… Why doesn’t Haruto want Miharu to follow him in the first place? He’s fine with me going?” Masato asked Miharu and Satsuki, tilting his head.

“That’s… because…” Miharu couldn’t find the right words.

“Probably because Haruto was Amakawa Haruto in his past life, and Miharu was his childhood friend, I guess. I can’t speak for Haruto any more than that, though. Right, Miharu?” Satsuki gave an ambiguous but simple explanation to avoid going into detail, before seeking Miharu’s agreement in a kind voice.

“…Yes.” Miharu nodded quietly.

What’s… the deal with that… Takahisa was overwhelmingly flustered, but he grit his teeth to force that feeling down.

Even though I decided I would be the one to protect her…

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I would... Things had taken such an unexpected turn in the mere months they had been apart, he couldn't accept that he would be separated from Miharu again.

Were they saying he was being kept out of the loop from the beginning? He didn't want to feel the fear of losing someone important to him anymore, so he had decided he would tell Miharu his feelings.

Yet, before he could even tell Miharu his feelings, this happens...

I have to do something... something... Takahisa was grinding his teeth when Aki squeezed his hand. His expression changed with a gasp and he squeezed her hand back.

"It'll be okay. I'll be with you," Aki whispered so that only Takahisa could hear, before speaking up. "All right, Miharu. I'll do it. I'll talk with Haruto."

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Meanwhile, after Rio had left the drawing room and bid farewell to the others, he walked with Charlotte down a hallway of the castle.

"Where might we be headed?" Rio asked with a chuckle.

"The people from the main Beltrum government are leaving to return to their kingdom today, so we'll be seeing them off first. After that, I have promised to have tea with Liselotte and was hoping you would be open to joining us," Charlotte answered in a strangely cheerful mood.

"Is that so..." Rio didn't know why she was in a good mood and watched her expression as he responded.

"Thank you very much, Sir Haruto," Charlotte suddenly said.

"For what, may I ask?"

"For Aki and Masato. You brought them to the castle because you could trust us, no? That means Lady Satsuki has

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also decided to trust us to some extent. We're very delighted about that. Perhaps you have already told her of our conversation during the dance at the banquet last night?"

"...Yes. However, I don't believe my passing of the message had any influence on the outcome." If Aki and Masato had desired it, they would have ended up coming to the castle anyway.

"You may claim that, but I don't believe that to be the case. Father was also extremely delighted and praised you highly for it, Sir Haruto." Charlotte smiled with a giggle. As they conversed, Rio and Charlotte walked towards the geometric garden that led to the castle gate.

Several horse carriages were waiting there as members of the Beltrum Kingdom royalty and nobility prepared to depart. They would be traveling to the Beltrum capital by enchanted ship, but the horse carriages were to take them from the castle to the harbor.

"It seems like they'll be departing soon. Princess Christina and the hero are over there, too. I'm glad we made it in time. Now, come this way, Sir Haruto." Rio followed Charlotte's lead towards the nobility of the Beltrum Kingdom. Considering their past, he wouldn't have approached them by choice, but the chance of his identity being discovered was extremely low. If anything, he wondered how many people from there actually remembered him.

"Are Princess Christina and Sir Rui available? I'd like to greet them and see them off. I'm the Galarc Kingdom's second princess, Charlotte, and this is the honorary knight, Sir Amakawa," Charlotte said to the knights guarding the horse carriages. It felt strange to have himself introduced as a knight, but it was certainly useful in how it made nobles more accommodating towards him.

"Please wait a moment." A knight left in a fluster at the arrival of figures of such high status. Less than a minute later, Christina and Rui appeared with their guards in tow.

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“Thank you for coming to see us off, Princess Charlotte, Sir Amakawa,” Christina greeted them gracefully.

“We probably won’t be seeing each other again for a while, so I wanted to at least bid you farewell. I had hoped we could talk more while you were here, but our positions make it difficult, after all. I’m happy we made it in time to see you off, though,” Charlotte said with a grin, glancing away from Christina nonchalantly. At the end of her gaze was Charles Arbor, who had accompanied the rest of the Beltrum Kingdom here.

Christina also shot Charles a glance before replying with a gentle smile. “We may be able to meet again sooner than expected, but you’re right. There’s always the possibility we won’t see each other again, so I’m glad we’re able to greet each other properly like this.” Then, she proceeded to direct her gaze at Rio. “Sir Amakawa, thank you for seeing us off, too. Sir Rui had also wanted to talk to you some more.”

“That’s… I’m honored.” Rio bowed his head deeply at Rui.

“I’m the one who is pleased to be able to see you again, Haruto. Like Princess Christina said, I wanted to speak with you,” Rui said, giving a refreshing smile.

“While it would be my pleasure, may I ask why?” Had he done something to attract his interest this much?

“It was because of what you said about your parents, I suppose. Your name sounds very similar to those of my hometown, so it made me feel a sense of familiarity, like you came from the same place as me. It seems that besides Satsuki, the other two heroes would rather be distanced from me, so if we ever have the chance to meet again, would you be willing to speak with me as a friend?” Rui said with a bittersweet smile, offering his hand to Rio for a handshake.

“Of course—I would be happy to.” Rio immediately shook Rui’s offered hand.

“Thank you.” Rui’s handsome face broke out in a happy smile. Then, Charles Arbor—who had been watching their

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exchange—approached.

“Are you two done? It’s almost time to depart,” he said to Christina and Rui.

“Yes. See you later, then,” Rui said and turned on his heel.

“Oh my, Sir Amakawa. You have some dust on your shoulder,” Christina suddenly pointed out.

“Oh, how embarrassing.” Rio reflexively moved his hand to pat away the dust.

“No, not over there…” Christina said, then took several steps towards Rio and whispered in Rio’s left ear so only he could hear.

“Thank you for saving Flora.”

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Charlotte was standing on Rio's right side, so she probably missed what happened.

"...Pardon me." Rio's eyes widened faintly, but he immediately bowed his head.

"There, it's gone now. Goodbye." Christina said no more than that, showing only a fleeting expression before she turned to head to the carriage.

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Having seen Christina and the others off, Rio and Charlotte went back inside the castle, to the rooftop garden that was limited to royalty and a select few others to meet up with Liselotte for a casual chat. There, they told Liselotte about Aki and Masato's existence.

"I apologize for not informing Lady Liselotte of the two of them in advance." Liselotte had been the one to bring Rio and Miharu to the banquet. Despite that, they had kept Aki and Masato a secret from her, and for that, Rio apologized.

"It's fine, I kept you and Lady Miharu's existence a secret from His Majesty up until we came to the capital myself, after all. Don't let it bother you," Liselotte said with a soft smile.

"I am most grateful for that." Rio bowed his head deeply. He had lost track of the number of times he had lowered his head since coming to the capital, but this time he felt true gratitude for her.

"I wonder what the five of them are discussing right now?" Charlotte brought the teacup to her mouth elegantly as she voiced her question.

"...Wouldn't they be discussing what to do about the future?" It was information that would soon be revealed whether he hid it or not.

"Lady Satsuki is with our kingdom while Sir Takahisa has been taken in by the Centostella Kingdom, after all. And you

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will be continuing your travels. Perhaps they're troubled by the issue of who will be going where?" Charlotte took an accurate guess at the situation Miharu and the others were in.

"Yes," Rio confirmed shortly.

"Hmm... Our kingdom would be in hot water if we didn't keep our friendship with Lady Satsuki ongoing, so unfortunately, that part cannot be avoided..." Charlotte tapped her index finger against her mouth, pondering.

"...I would have thought the most natural process would be for Sir Takahisa to take in Aki and Masato. Is there a problem with that?" Liselotte asked.

"Yes. There are... many things to consider." Rio confirmed evasively.

"Sir Takahisa appears to be infatuated with Lady Miharu. Could that possibly play a part in things? That, or Aki adores Sir Haruto so much, Sir Takahisa is opposed to it." Charlotte put on an air of curiosity as she suddenly brought up specific examples. But even the sharp-minded Charlotte felt that she was slightly off the mark somehow.

"I wonder." Rio evaded replying with a wry smile.

"My apologies for interrupting your gathering..." A visitor had arrived at the gazebo in the garden where they were talking. It was Satsuki, the very person they were discussing.

"Oh, Lady Satsuki. Are you done with your discussions already?" Charlotte addressed Satsuki on behalf of the three of them.

"No, we're still in the middle of our talk, but I was wondering if we could borrow Haruto." Satsuki looked at Rio and bowed her head awkwardly.

"Oh my, is that so? Of course, if Sir Haruto is willing, then we have no reason to refuse. Isn't that right, Liselotte?" Charlotte turned to her in a cheerful tone.

"Yes, of course," Liselotte agreed immediately. Thus, Rio took his leave with Satsuki.

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Roughly ten minutes later, Rio arrived at the drawing room where Miharu and the others waited.

“Sorry about this. Just sit anywhere that’s open, Haruto,” Satsuki prompted with a rather tired expression before sitting next to Miharu herself.

“Sure.” Rio obediently sat down on the empty sofa. Directly across from him was Masato, and diagonally opposite were larger sofas, which sat Miharu and Satsuki on one side, and Aki and Takahisa on the other.

For the record, the reason why he was summoned and the discussion that had occurred up until now had been explained to him on the way there.

“I’ve told Haruto that Aki wants to speak to him, but if we’re in the way, we can leave. Though it may be better to have Miharu present…” Satsuki looked between Rio and Aki before settling on Miharu.

“I don’t care if you stay or not. Only if Haruto has things he can’t say in front of everyone else, I suppose,” Aki said in a rather sharp tone, as though she was testing Rio.

“…I won’t know until I’ve heard from Aki what she wants to say, but I don’t mind if you all stay. As long as you promise to keep anything said here confidential from the others,” Rio replied calmly.

“Of course. This is a private discussion, after all. Is everyone else fine with that?” Satsuki looked around at everyone. Miharu and Masato confirmed immediately, but this confirmation was actually directed at Takahisa. When his gaze met Satsuki’s, he froze and nodded stiffly.

“Now, what do you want to say to me? Does it have something to do with Amakawa Haruto?” Rio asked Aki himself.

“You speak as though he’s a stranger to you,” Aki replied reproachfully.

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“He’s not a stranger, but he is someone else. I cannot act as though I’m Amakawa Haruto.” His words had a sense of resolution in them that made Aki gulp. However, she couldn’t back down.

“Does that mean you think nothing of me?”

“That’s not what I said,” Rio replied in a pained tone.

“But I’ve heard that you didn’t really want Miharu to go with you. Even though you used to call her Mii-chan and loved her so much in the past. Does that mean you don’t love Miharu anymore? Do you hate her now? Is that why you don’t want her to follow you? And me as well…” He didn’t call her name in the same affectionate way that he used to. While she swallowed those words at the end, Aki was becoming more and more emotional.

“I don’t hate her.”

“Then why don’t you call Miharu ‘Mii-chan’ anymore? Why don’t you want her to go along with you?”

“…I won’t call Miharu by the nickname in my memories. I can’t. I’m not Miharu’s childhood friend anymore,” Rio answered, making Aki grind her teeth. Miharu had a miserable look on her face, and Satsuki was frowning sullenly.

“I don’t want Miharu to follow me because I still consider her important to me, though I am now a different person to Amakawa Haruto. That’s why I believe the best option would be for her to live somewhere safe. The same goes for you, Aki. Also, it’s precisely because I am a different person now that I believe it would be better for those of you who know the Amakawa Haruto within me to stay away,” Rio continued, his expression dimmed.

“…I don’t understand what you mean at the end there.” Aki tilted her head with an unimpressed look. The same went for Takahisa and Masato.

“For you and Miharu, who know Amakawa Haruto, wouldn’t you unconsciously think of me as him, or otherwise

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let your opinions of him overshadow how you think of me?”

“…” They couldn’t deny it. After all, Aki was presently seeing Amakawa Haruto in Haruto as she used him as an outlet for her illogical rage.

“But I’m not Amakawa Haruto. Amakawa Haruto is dead, so I am unable to respond to you as him,” he said with a smile of resignation, and Aki’s expression clearly stiffened—as though she was a child who had realized what she had done wrong.

Rio felt guilty for his inability to word things better. However, he had to tell them like this—because he was Rio, not Amakawa Haruto.

Amakawa Haruto had values cultivated by living a comfortable, quiet life in peaceful modern Japan. Knowing that and understanding that such a life was out of his own reach, Rio held that preciousness in contempt and decided to push on down the path of revenge. He had already sullied his hands numerous times, even without the revenge as a factor.

That’s why Rio thought he had no right to enjoy living in a peaceful world where Miharu and Aki placed themselves beside him as Amakawa Haruto. He didn’t think he belonged there.

“Even if you say that, though… Haruto still has the memories of Amakawa Haruto, right? So isn’t it a little sad to call yourself a different person? You’re still the same Haruto. Do you really feel nothing with Miharu and Aki in front of you?” Masato’s shoulders and voice trembled as he spoke.

“…I do. That’s why they’re important to me. That’s why I don’t think they should be near me.” Rio’s voice was truly calm, conveying how he had given up. That much was clear.

“If they’re important to you, then I think that’s all the more reason why you should keep them near you. If I were you, I’d rather have them beside me,” Satsuki said, unable to

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help but give her opinion.

"...That's why I said I'd respect Miharu's decision. I may be traveling about in the future, but I intend on keeping a safe living environment for them like I have until now," Rio replied with his gaze averted from Satsuki.

"No, that's wrong. Didn't I say I wanted to stay beside you? Didn't you accept that, Haruto?" Before she knew it, Miharu's words were coming out hoarsely. Rio was going to use his travels as an excuse to be scarce around her, she feared.

"You'd be continuing to live as you have until now. Wouldn't you call that being together?" Rio replied quietly.

"No. I wouldn't call it that at all," Miharu stated bluntly.

"..." Rio didn't say anything, letting the silence drag on instead.

...How could he treat what I want so desperately like something he doesn't need... And yet, he's taking what I need... away from me! Listening to the conversation made Takahisa feel like he was going mad. With his shoulders squared, he bit down on his bottom lip and frowned.

"However reluctantly, I was glad to hear you had approved of Miharu's desire to stay together because I thought that meant he had accepted her feelings a little... But I see that wasn't the case at all." Satsuki stared into Rio's eyes with disappointment and exasperation.

"..." Though he had a logical objection to that, Rio said nothing.

"Haruto, come with me for a moment," Satsuki said quietly, standing up with determination.

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Rio held a glaive for mock battles in his hand, facing Satsuki, who held the same weapon in hers. They stood on the parade grounds of the Galarc Kingdom castle.

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“Umm, how did things come to this?” Rio asked as he checked his grip on the glaive.

“Because I’m not happy with you.” Satsuki furrowed her brow, her answer short. A bit too short, as the point completely flew past Rio.

“For what reason?” Although Rio had a faint idea, he asked anyway.

“Haruto!” Satsuki jabbed her finger at him.

“I suppose it’s all about me, right?” Her answer was a little off from what he’d expected—it seemed like Satsuki was quite angry, so he gave a pained smile in an attempt to smooth things over.

“But I don’t want you to get the wrong idea. This isn’t me trying to force my opinion onto you. I think your points are correct, and I know you’ve made them after giving them a lot of thought and consideration. I can also sympathize with your fears.

“However, you can’t come up with the answer alone. Miharu’s also given this a lot of thought, gone through and settled her own conflicts, and come up with an answer to give to you. Don’t run away from her. Face her head-on. Masato said it already—don’t act like a stranger, or they’ll be sad. He’s definitely still within you. He’s no longer anywhere except within you. So don’t… don’t…” Satsuki said, appealing to Rio with sincerity. Watching over their conversation right beside them was Miharu, Aki, Masato and Takahisa.

However, as they were using the parade grounds for knights and soldiers to train on, some of them were also watching the two of them from afar. They were out of hearing range, so they couldn’t overhear their conversation, but the tense atmosphere was apparent.

Furthermore, news of the duel between the hero Satsuki and honorary knight Haruto must have spread throughout the castle, as members of royalty and nobility were crowding the parade grounds. Among them were Charlotte and

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Liselotte from the Galarc Kingdom, the Restoration's Flora, Hiroaki, Roanna, and Duke Huguenot, as well as Centostella Kingdom's Lilianna and her female knights.

"...Just so you know, I fully intend on becoming better friends with you in the future as well. We haven't known each other for long, but I already consider you a close friend of mine. That's how much you mean to me already. That's why I won't forgive you if you try to run away. This time, I'll show you how much you mean to us. If it won't reach you through words, then I'll beat it into your body. I'll beat you until you break." Satsuki's passionate but eloquent speech left Rio staring in a daze, but he eventually smiled.

"...Wouldn't it be bad if you did that?"

"S-Shut up! At any rate, you never know until you try!" Satsuki yelled, cheeks reddening at Rio's teasing.

"Lady Satsuki!" Two groups of people approached them. One was Charlotte and Liselotte, while the other was Lilianna and her female knights. Charlotte was the one who had called Satsuki's name as she hurried over. Meanwhile, Lilianna headed towards Takahisa.

Ah, had they come to stop them after all? They had asked a knight nearby, but they were using the parade grounds without permission from the main person in charge and had paused training because of it, Satsuki thought.

"Honestly! If you're going to do something so interesting, please let us know first. I can prepare a referee for your match if you so wish, as well. How about it?" Charlotte was unexpectedly on board with the whole thing.

"Ah, no, that's okay..." Satsuki replied through her surprise.

"Understood. All right, everyone. Come this way." Figuring they should get out of the way of the match, Charlotte led everyone—including Lilianna's group—to a safe location. With that, the match was ready to commence without issue.

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Satsuki faced Rio and looked at the glaive in his hand. “Do you know how to use that?”

“Yes—it’s similar to a naginata. I am familiar with it.” Rio spun the glaive once, showing he knew how to handle it.

“That’s good to hear. Then, I’ll just warn you in advance—there’s no holding back just because I’m a hero. I’m going to come at you with my all, so I expect the same from you.” It wasn’t a match for show; Satsuki made sure to emphasize that first.

Rio nodded in resignation. “...I understand. What will we do about the rules? And sorcery?”

“Let’s have a one-hit match with no time limit. Releasing your weapon won’t count as a loss, and victory will be decided by either stopping before a decisive finishing blow, or striking somewhere vital other than the face. The only sorcery allowed is physical enhancement. That okay with you? My divine arms automatically activates a sorcery that enhances my body... If you can only enhance your strength with magic, then I’ll hold back a little,” Satsuki explained, looking at Rio for his reaction.

“That’s fine with me. I can enhance my body using this enchanted sword,” Rio said, drawing his sword from the sheath at his waist. After his promotion to an honorary knight, he was now permitted to walk around inside the castle with his sword.

“Hmm... so that’s the enchanted sword that drove back the demi-dragon’s breath. If you’re more used to using swords, shouldn’t you use that instead?” Satsuki looked at the sword in Rio’s hand with interest.

“No, that’s okay. But it’s a little annoying to have while holding the glaive.” Rio made a show of using the sword to activate the body enhancement, when he was actually using spirit arts to do so instead. Then, he stabbed the glaive into the ground and instantly moved over to where Miharu and the others were.

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“...?!” The group froze in shock. Even Lilianna’s knights were slow to react.

“Masato,” Rio called out.

“Y-Yeah?” Masato replied hesitantly.

“Could you hold onto this sword for me? It’ll get in the way of the match,” Rio said, handing the sheathed sword to Masato.

“Got it. Leave it to me!” Masato accepted Rio’s sword enthusiastically. With a parting thanks, Rio returned to face Satsuki.

“Whoa, what was that magic essence... It’s pouring out of him, yet there’s no waste at all. It’s beautiful.” Alice, the youngest of the knights guarding Lilianna, stared closely at Rio with a grimace.

“...It may be better to stand further back.” The eldest knight also had a stiff look to her face.

“I’m ready.” Rio returned before Satsuki and picked up the glaive he’d stabbed into the ground, assuming his stance.

“It really seems I won’t have a chance of winning if I don’t come at you with the intention to break you,” Satsuki said with a smile, seeming to sense the gap in their abilities after seeing Rio’s movements just now. However, she couldn’t back down here.

Rio picked up a pebble on the ground. “How about we signal the start of the match with the moment this hits the ground after I throw it?” he asked in a tone that showed his ease.

“...Sure. I’m ready whenever.” Satsuki tensed her expression and agreed, taking one step forward with her left foot and holding her glaive at the ready halfway. It was the basic stance of a glaive that was easy to move with, making it suitable for both offense and defense.

“Here goes, then,” Rio said, throwing the pebble straight up and readying himself similarly to Satsuki in the middle. Several moments later, the pebble landed on the ground.

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“Hah!” Satsuki called out a battle cry and charged with her full speed. She came within a short distance of Rio and made a fast strike. But Rio entangled the tip of Satsuki’s glaive and cleanly parried it.

However, Satsuki expected that much from him. She maintained her stance that was faithful to the fundamentals and brought her abilities past the limits of her body to make a persistent attack. However, Rio’s experience in real battles far surpassed Satsuki’s. He parried all of her attacks with skill.

Satsuki stepped back to widen the distance before shouting at Rio. “What was that about being somewhat familiar with a glaive?! I wanted to finish this in the first hit, but you’ve been dealing with all my attacks so easily!”

“I could see right through you,” Rio said with a bold smile.

“That’s enough!!” Satsuki resumed her assault. She made an overhead attack with all her energy—as a feint. She rotated the handle of the glaive to flip the blade of the tip in a tricky maneuver.

However, Rio easily stepped to the side to avoid it. Satsuki immediately swung the glaive to the side, performing a followup attack.

Rio lowered his glaive, knocking the side-sweeping slash Satsuki had released straight to the ground. He proceeded to hold Satsuki’s glaive to the ground just like that. Before the blade could be buried into the ground, Satsuki promptly pulled the handle of the weapon to avoid having her movements fixed. In the next moment, she cut around to Rio’s side and swung the tip at his feet.

Rio had foreseen that move, as he used the leg she was aiming at to step on the tip of Satsuki’s weapon with rapid reaction speed. He placed his weight onto that foot, sinking the blade into the ground. Then, he proceeded to make a rather weak side-sweeping attack.

“What?!” Satsuki released the handle of the glaive on the

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spur of the moment, barely retreating in time to avoid Rio's attack. However, she was astonished by the guts behind Rio's acrobatic defense and gaped speechlessly. The same applied to the gallery of spectators.

"...The glaive is indeed a similar weapon to the naginata. However, this isn't a competitive match, but a real duel. The accuracy of each individual strike is important, but if you aim for a single finishing blow like in a competition, I'll be able to read your timing easily." Rio temporarily moved out of the stance he had assumed to speak to Satsuki.

There was no issue in using the fundamental stances for competitive naginata, but in a real battle, where the only condition was to make contact, there were no rules. For example, attacks that didn't need to be avoided in a competitive match absolutely had to be avoided in this duel, and focusing on attacks with contest rules in mind would only become a disadvantage to oneself.

"I-I know that! Are you going easy on me?!" Satsuki's tone roughened as she objected to Rio in a sulky tone. Indeed, she was aware of it. Some of the movements she had made just now were definitely removed from the typical naginata moves for competition. However, there was still a part of her that was being influenced by it. Rio had seen through that with his defensive move just now.

"That is not my intention. But if the match ends too quickly, then you wouldn't have beaten anything into me."

"Ugh..." Satsuki grimaced, feeling like she had been insulted. However, Satsuki knew Haruto wasn't the kind of person to make these statements without thinking. She felt uneasy about it.

After she digested Rio's next words, she realized that his statement hadn't come from a place of insult.

"In other words... I also want to come at you with my full strength. That's what I mean. You asked for me not to hold back, so I thought I could inform you of the factors you may

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be insufficient in at the moment.”

“…You know, you really are a clumsy person.” Satsuki felt like clutching her head and groaning. If that’s what he felt, then he could have just confronted her with his words from the start.

He must be the kind of person who was awkward with words.

Even though he’s stubborn enough to constantly argue back logically… Being only able to communicate with the language of the body was rather extreme.

“Ahaha…” Instead of replying, Rio used the tip of his own glaive to release Satsuki’s embedded glaive and throw it towards her.

“Honestly, you’re…” Satsuki accepted the flying glaive and glared at Rio reproachfully. How obnoxious. It was such an infuriating action, yet for some reason, she didn’t feel any anger rise within her.

Instead, she actually found it attractive. To a despicable degree, really…

Ah, I think I get why Miharu fell for him… It was like she couldn’t leave the boy in front of her alone, which made it all the more irritating that he had such perfect, superhuman-like abilities.

“…Haruto. Give me one more chance to cross swords with you. I won’t show such disgraceful behavior next time.” Satsuki held back the urge to react bashfully, instead raising her head to boldly speak up.

“That was my intention from the start,” Rio said, readying his glaive. Satsuki was captivated by that sight until she readjusted her own glaive.

“…I’m ready,” she said with a serious expression after taking a deep breath and spending several moments gathering her wits about her. In that time, Rio had picked up the pebble again. He threw it into the air.

A pause, before the pebble hit the ground.

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“Haaah!” Satsuki charged towards Rio with even more vigor than before. It looked like she was strongly conscious of the naginata stances for a competition, but the rushing strike she made had a different flavor from earlier.

She aimed straight for an area not normally aimed for in competition. Or so she feigned, immediately moving to aim at a typical spot for competition instead—she had adjusted her plan of attack to be unpredictable to Rio.

I’ll definitely make him eat his words! Satsuki decided, retreating momentarily to use both hands to spin the glaive at high speed. Immediately after, she charged straight at Rio. By randomizing the trajectory of the spinning, she could attack from all different angles.

“Your movements are completely different now.” Rio evaded the dance of Satsuki’s glaive lightly, a smile on his face. Satsuki’s fundamentals had been well built to begin with, so even her non-traditional movements had good form. She had few openings, too.

“It doesn’t feel like a compliment when you say that with such a relaxed face!” Satsuki made full use of her strengthened body to stop the spinning of the polearm at once, making a surprise strike. But Rio retreated and twisted his body to avoid the thrust calmly. Then, by sliding his left hand slightly up from the bottom of the glaive, he aimed to knock Satsuki’s feet out from underneath her using the tip.

“Whoa!” Satsuki jumped at that moment, evading the swing. But the tip of the glaive Rio was swinging came to a complete stop after piercing through empty air, immediately turning the blade over and drawing a well-aimed path towards Satsuki.

“Kyah?!”

“Nice reaction speed.”

Satsuki braced her polearm on the spur of the moment, stopping Rio’s glaive with the handle. However, Rio shook off the glaive with his enhanced physical abilities, blowing

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Satsuki away alongside it. Satsuki landed on the ground heavily, backing off as she regained her balance. She proceeded to distance herself from Rio.

But at that moment, Rio moved onto the offense. He closed the distance between them and launched a series of endless strikes.

“Guh…” Satsuki set her eyes on Rio and handled the blows with a pained expression.

This was bad—she had to do something. Just as she thought that, Rio feinted a thrusting strike aimed at Satsuki, before pulling back to swing it sideways.

Satsuki lowered her posture to neatly evade the incoming glaive from the side, making a swift counter strike.

“Got you!”

However, Rio used his skillful footwork to move, barely evading Satsuki’s thrust.

“Ooh!” The fierce exchange of offense and defense that left no time to blink made their audience cheer excitedly. However, their voices didn’t reach the ears of the two locked in battle.

“Haah!” Satsuki made an uppercut swing. However, Rio blocked Satsuki’s attack before it came down and parried her strength skillfully, directing it in another direction. Satsuki staggered backwards, the momentum disrupting her balance.

However, she somehow managed to hold out, resolutely aiming a strike at Rio’s torso. Rio beat her to the punch by swinging his glaive, deflecting the incoming tip with great force.

“It’s… not over yet! I won’t give up!” Satsuki persisted, adjusting the trajectory of the deflected tip and forcefully swinging it at Rio. However—

“Huh?!” Rio had predicted Satsuki’s attack from the moment she held out, leaping lightly to step on the tip of Satsuki’s glaive once again. He proceeded to place his weight

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on it.

“Kyah!” The pressure placed on the tip of the glaive from above made Satsuki lose her handle of the weapon. The blade was buried into the ground again. It only took a moment for their gallery to stir over the acrobatic feat.

“…I yield.” With Rio’s glaive pointed at her neck, the fight seeped out of Satsuki as she announced her defeat.

“Thank you very much for the duel.” Rio had a gentle smile that almost looked content.

“Thank you as well. Ah, I couldn’t win in the end. Defeat, utter defeat!” Despite her words, Satsuki looked rather refreshed. During that time, the gallery applauded their tremendous match in praise.

“I think it was a close match.” Rio looked around at the audience applauding from afar.

“You say that, but you weren’t going all-out at all. Rather than an even fight, it was just me coming at you with my all. I can tell, you know,” Satsuki said in a huff, glaring at Rio.

“Ahaha, who knows.” Rio tried to brush it off, but Satsuki’s glare remained.

“But do you know now? What I was trying to tell you, and how serious I was about it.” Satsuki sighed tiredly.

“…Yes, I suppose.” Rio nodded with an awkward look.

“Then, to cap it off, I’ll give you one word of advice. Whether you want to listen or not is completely up to you.”

“Sure, what is it?” She was a very careful person, passing on a message with words and not just body language this time. Thinking that, Rio’s mouth turned up into a smile.

“I think all the logical-sounding fears you have are correct. That thoughtfulness will be extremely important in the future, I’m sure. But thinking so much that you can’t act when you need to—to put it negatively, is the action of a good-for-nothing.”

“How harsh…” Rio said deprecatingly. But, strangely enough, he didn’t feel like he was being lectured.

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“That’s right. It was only for the one day of the opening ceremony, but I was still your upperclassman. It’s my duty to advise a lost underclassman,” Satsuki said, smiling softly. “Other than that… Well. This is more of a personal request.” Satsuki began to say something before closing her mouth, staring at Rio without moving.

“What is it?”

“I’m sure you’ve realized already, but Takahisa’s in love with Miharu.” Satsuki glanced over at Takahisa standing with Miharu at the others before looking to Rio and nodding.

“…Yes.”

They seemed to have realized that Rio and Satsuki were discussing something important, as they didn’t come over. Following their lead, Charlotte and the others also remained there and simply watched.

“Miharu, Aki, Takahisa, Masato, and myself. The relationships between the five of us have greatly changed since the days when we were on Earth. I fear that there may be no recovering some of those relationships. No, I fear the situation we’re in will inevitably make that unavoidable,” Satsuki said with a quiet look.

“…” Rio listened without saying anything.

“Whether the relationship between the five of us worsens beyond repair, or whether it worsens to a salvageable extent is, I’m sorry to say, dependent upon you, Haruto. It’s beyond my power. Even Miharu, who holds the key to Aki and Takahisa’s emotions, can no longer do anything. Actually… No. I think something can be done about it if Miharu sacrifices her own needs. Do you understand what I’m saying?” She was, in other words, talking about Miharu following Aki and Takahisa. That was exactly the future that the two of them desired, but it was in opposition to what Miharu wanted.

“…” Rio held his silence with an even more vexed look.

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“Do you believe that Miharu could truly be happy that way? Do you believe Miharu will find happiness in suppressing her own wish to stay with you, sacrificing herself instead? I think you know the answer to that, don’t you? You’re kind, but you’re clumsy, so you may be holding yourself back out of consideration for Aki, but…

“If… If you understand what I’m saying, then I’d like you to listen to my request. Just like our match right now, there are things you’ll only know if you clash head-on with them. There are things that won’t be conveyed otherwise. I want you to do the same with Aki and Takahisa, without any reservation. Then, I want you to secure a future for us, where we’ll all be able to laugh together. I know what I’m saying is completely unreasonable. Of course, I’ll also help as much as I can, but that’s my request. If… If you can do that, then—” Satsuki paused. She stared at Rio without blinking.

“I’ll do anything in my power to thank you. My hero—Haruto,” she said shyly but clearly.

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Chapter 5: A Duel and the Result

The night of the duel with Satsuki, Rio informed her and Miharu that he would be stepping out for a moment. Then, he headed by himself to the guest rooms where Takahisa was staying with Aki, Masato, and Lilianna.

He didn't bring Satsuki and Miharu along because he felt it was appropriate to speak to Takahisa and Aki alone.

Thus, he arrived before the rooms where Lilianna's female knights stood guard. However, the two knights seemed more like young girls than adults. One was the petite Alice, who looked to be in her early- to mid-teens. The other was Kiara, who seemed similar to Rio's age, in her mid-teens.

"Oh, it's the really strong guy. Wow, he looks even cooler up close. Ah, my name's Alice. The second daughter of a duke in the Centostella Kingdom." The petite girl, Alice, introduced herself in an overly familiar way. She had a rather wild personality for a knight serving a member of the royal family.

"Hey, Alice!" Kiara immediately scolded her.

"F-Forgive me, Miss Kiara!" Alice apologized in a vacant voice.

"I'm not the one you should be apologizing to. Please forgive the rudeness, Sir Amakawa." Kiara sighed tiredly, bowing her head at Rio.

"No, it doesn't bother me. In fact, I should be the one apologizing for dropping by without warning, as I'd like to meet with Sir Takahisa. Could you pass on the message for me?"

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"…Understood. Please wait a moment. You come too, Alice." Kiara thought for a moment before entering the rooms with Alice, leaving Rio alone outside.

"Welcome. Please come inside." Lilianna's attendant, Frill, came out to invite Rio inside less than a minute later. Rio followed Frill into the room.

"Excuse me." He bowed his head deeply as soon as he stepped in, his hand over his chest. Sitting on the high-class sofa inside the room was Takahisa, Aki, Masato and Lilianna.

"Welcome, Sir Haruto," Lilianna greeted on behalf of the others.

"Thank you very much for agreeing to meet with me, despite the late hour." Rio turned to Lilianna and bowed his head once more.

"I heard that you have business with Sir Takahisa."

"Yes—Aki and Masato as well, to be precise. Princess Lilianna is welcome to sit in as well, if you so wish," Rio said respectfully.

"…What is this about?" Takahisa asked Rio warily.

"The continuation of the conversation the six of us had today. After our match, Satsuki said some things to me. I have come here to inform you of my thoughts and opinions of the future."

Rio's answer made Lilianna close her eyes and think for a moment, before speaking up. "…In that case, please use the room over there." She would probably hear the details from Takahisa later. Rio's past life aside, Lilianna would have been informed about their plans for the future and who would be staying with whom.

"I am most grateful for your consideration." Rio bowed deeply to express his gratitude.

"What are you waiting for? Let's go." Masato stood up first, prompting Takahisa and Aki to move as well.

"…Yeah. Let's go, Takahisa." Thus, the four of them

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moved to an adjacent bedroom. This was the bedroom where the three members of the Sendo family were staying. The room's furnishings consisted of three beds, a desk, and four armchairs.

"Let's sit down. I'll sit beside Haruto." Masato sat down on an armchair with a thump.

"Okay. Then, if you don't mind." Rio huffed with a smile and sat beside Masato. Takahisa and Aki took the seats opposite them. Once Rio confirmed that everyone was seated, he immediately began to speak.

"First, you should know that my thoughts are generally the same as what I told you during the match today. However, I no longer have the reluctance that I previously did. As long as everyone has thought about their answer, I have decided that I will respect that."

"...What are you trying to say?" Takahisa asked with a dubious look.

"If Miharu and Masato say that they want to remain in my care as they have until now, then I will no longer try to stop them. As long as they have made that decision after hearing my thoughts, then they can do as they wish," Rio said with a strangely discerning expression.

"...B-But you should! You should refuse them! Didn't you say that you didn't want them with you? You still think that way, don't you?! So why have you changed your mind so suddenly? Refuse them more firmly! Stop stealing my family away from me!" Takahisa yelled in shock. Because Rio had openly indicated his intention to welcome Miharu and Masato, the negative feelings he had suppressed until now exploded.

"Takahisa..." Aki's face fell as she watched the sudden change in her brother.

"I cannot," Rio stated bluntly.

"...Why not?" Takahisa asked resentfully.

"Would my refusal change their minds? And if it did,

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would the two of them be happy to accept that? In the end, that wouldn't be respecting their opinions. That's why," Rio answered smoothly. Masato smiled, looking somewhat happy about that.

"...Coward," said Takahisa. "You're a coward. Even though you say you don't want Miharu with you, you don't want to refuse her either—that's cowardice! How does doing something like that equal respect?"

"You have a point. I thought the same. However, if it doesn't count as respect whether I refuse them or not, then I at least want to show my acceptance. It'd be better than completely running away by refusing to accept them—that's what Satsuki told me. So I decided I'd face them properly." Rio explained his thoughts in a calm voice.

"But that's—!" *That's just convenient for you*, was what Takahisa was about to respond with.

"...Then are you running away from me, Haruto? If you let me go to Centostella Kingdom like this, wouldn't that be the same as avoiding the problem with me?" Aki added to the conversation in an aggressive tone.

"I have no intention of doing that. That's why I came here alone. I wanted to face you without Miharu and Satsuki present. If you allow it, I'd like to talk to you properly, one-on-one." Rio didn't falter as he answered Aki.

"..." Aki was rendered speechless for a moment.

"Aki!" Takahisa reflexively called the name of his stepsister, looking at her pleadingly. Was this man about to steal Aki from him as well? He couldn't allow that.

"...Because Miharu and I knew Amakawa Haruto, we unconsciously see you as Amakawa Haruto instead and overlap their existences. That's what you said, right?"

"Yes, I did say that."

"Do you dislike being overlapped with him?"

"That's... not quite right. What I don't want is to be overlapped with a different person and compared to him."

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And consequently, disappointing their expectations. Making them regret staying with him. That's why he wanted to reveal himself and keep his distance before such a thing could happen. Even now, he still had the desire to stay away from them.

"I can only see that 'different person' reasoning as nothing more than a convenient excuse to run away." Aki glared at Rio with a look of contempt.

"It's true that we're different people. I do things that Amakawa Haruto would never do. Deeds that Amakawa Haruto would feel greatly opposed to committing, I would do without batting an eye."

"…What, for example?" Aki asked doubtfully.

"Killing people." Rio indifferently stated what a Japanese person would feel the most disgust towards committing.

"…" Aki was at a loss for words. Takahisa had also fallen speechless, out of shock. Only Masato was less surprised than the two of them, though his eyes did widen faintly.

"When it comes to a battle, I will kill. If I can only protect myself by killing, if a battle can only be ended through killing, then I have no choice but to do so. I've come to accept that. Even at this very moment, there's someone out there that I must kill." Knowing the morals of Japanese people was precisely why Rio considered himself incompatible with Miharu and the others. In general, he thought of Japanese morals as precious things to keep, and while he was greatly influenced by the values of Amakawa Haruto during times of peace, he considered those values to be a lie deep down inside, where he was cruel and repulsive.

"Have you ever killed someone before?" Takahisa asked with a look of complete contempt.

"I have," Rio said without any shame. He felt it was better to answer directly.

"So you're a murderer…" Takahisa muttered with spite.

"Indeed I am."

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“…Killing just because it’s necessary doesn’t make it right. It’s unacceptable on a human level. I can’t leave Miharu or Masato in the care of a person like you,” Takahisa said with a cold calmness, having found an excuse to justify himself.

“Hey, bro!” Masato tried to intervene.

“Shut up! As if I could leave my precious brother in the hands of a murderer!” Takahisa yelled over him.

“…You’re going too far,” Masato muttered, his shoulders trembling with rage.

“Miharu won’t be happy being with you. It’d be better for her sake to be with me, the hero. I would be able to protect Miharu,” Takahisa claimed, as though convincing himself he was the better one between them.

“Huh? As if you’d be able to beat Haruto, bro,” Masato sneered.

“H-Haruto, you also felt the same way when you told Miharu she was better off away from you, no?”

“…Indeed.” Rio nodded once.

“Then… You’re a coward! If you know that much, you’re a coward for refusing to reject Miharu! Miharu only wants to follow you because she doesn’t know you’re a murderer. Probably because she sees you as a different person, like you said. She’d definitely feel disgusted if she knew,” Takahisa said fiercely.

“…She is aware.”

“What?” Rio’s quiet statement made Takahisa lose all his fervor.

“Miharu knows I have killed people. I’ve told both Miharu and Satsuki everything.”

“Wha…” And she wanted to be with him despite that?! Miharu would choose someone so selfish? Not to mention Satsuki, who was an upperclassman he had always respected…

“Is she a fool? Miharu…” Aki muttered bitterly in disbelief. However, this meant there were no more means of

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stopping Miharu as they had wanted to.

“Do you really, truly intend on accepting Miharu like this? Even though you know Miharu may come to regret everything. No, she’ll definitely regret everything!” Takahisa seemed to have the same thought as Aki, as he objected in a panicked state.

“If she wants to come along in spite of that, then I will no longer refuse her. Although, I don’t know if I’ll be able to respond to her as Amakawa Haruto…” While Rio looked a little guilty at that, he stated his opinion clearly.

“…I won’t stand for this,” Takahisa murmured, then raised his voice. “I absolutely won’t stand for this. As if I could leave Miharu in your hands!” His heart was already backed into a corner, making him act on pure desperation, but he couldn’t afford to back down here.

“…Then, what would you like to do?” Rio knew things would come to this. He had come here prepared for it.

“Duel with me. If I win, you must reject Miharu’s wishes. I’m going to win and prove your dishonesty. Watch me!” Of all things, Takahisa challenged Rio to a fight. No matter what the pretense for it, it was a request to fight him.

“…Your actions seem to be an attempt to bend Miharu’s will to suit your own desires, in my eyes,” Rio pointed out.

“A-Are you trying to justify yourself?!” Takahisa yelled back, guilt laden in his voice.

“No, nothing of the sort. If you wish to have a duel in order to treat Miharu like some kind of object, then I definitely will not lose. At the very least, I won’t attempt to bend Miharu to my own will. That’s all.” Rio gave his stance indifferently.

“…Sorry, but I’ll be supporting Haruto,” Masato suddenly said.

“What?!” Takahisa glared at Masato with a frown.

“I’m willing to bet on it, too. If Haruto loses to you, I’ll do whatever you tell me to do. How about it?” Masato glared

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back in a challenge.

“S-Stop it, you two…” Aki watched the relationship between her two brothers break down helplessly.

Masato frowned as he looked at Aki, before he stood up brusquely. “…Let’s go, Haruto. It’s already late, so you should just settle the match first thing tomorrow. Sorry, but could you let me stay in your room? I can’t deal with sleeping here anymore.” He wanted to leave the room now.

“…” Takahisa seemed to accept Masato’s challenge, as he didn’t bother to stop him. He furrowed his brows as he sat silently. There was nothing more to say here.

“…All right. Let’s go.” Rio sighed and stood up. He proceeded to guide Masato out of the room with a hand on his back.

“…” Aki looked like she wanted to say something to Rio’s departing figure, but her mouth didn’t move. Thus, Rio and Masato left the bedroom and came face-to-face with Lilianna in the living room, seated on the sofa with a frustrated expression.

“Please accept my deepest apologies for causing a stir so late at night.” Rio bowed deeply to Lilianna. Even if she hadn’t heard every word of the conversation, she must have been able to overhear the yelling from the bedroom.

“Not at all…” Lilianna shook her head slowly.

“Also, I know this is extremely selfish of me, but Sir Takahisa and I have decided to have a match tomorrow morning, just like with Lady Satsuki. Of course, I will forfeit if Princess Lilianna has any objections, but may I have your approval?” Rio requested politely, hanging his head.

“As long as it is Sir Takahisa’s will, I will not stop anyone. If possible, I would also like to entrust Masato to Sir Amakawa’s care tonight, though it may be inconvenient for you. In regards to the match, I shall arrange everything with His Majesty for approval.” Lilianna dropped her gaze slightly, her beautiful face clouding over fleetingly.

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“...I am most grateful for that. Then, if you would excuse me.” Rio placed his right hand over his chest and bowed his head once more, before returning to Satsuki’s quarters with Masato.

The next morning, in the arena that was adjacent to the castle and away from the parade grounds, Rio faced Takahisa. It wasn’t only the venue that differed from his match with Satsuki yesterday—to prevent this match from becoming a spectacle, the audience seats were filled with only a select few people who were involved.

Among them were, of course, Miharu, Satsuki, Masato, and Aki, as well as Lilianna and Charlotte.

However, Aki wasn’t seated together with Miharu, Satsuki, and Masato; instead, she was seated beside Lilianna a short distance away. Her eyes were fixed on Takahisa.

Meanwhile, Miharu and Satsuki had been brought to the arena after being informed that the discussion resulted in a duel.

“Hey, Masato. How did things end up like this?” Miharu asked him—Masato was seated beside her.

“’Cause my brother’s an idiot. Well, just think of it like a fight between men. You can ask Haruto yourself after the match is over.” Last night, Masato had returned to their rooms with Rio and immediately gone to sleep in a huff. He acted like this every time Miharu asked him for the details. She knew that Rio went to have a discussion with the Sendo family and could tell that some kind of argument had resulted from it, but Rio awkwardly avoided giving her any details, leaving Miharu at a loss.

“Haruto’s probably trying to communicate with us in his own way, don’t you think? There are things we won’t know without clashing, and I’m sure he’ll do the same to you one day, Miharu. So let’s just believe in him and just watch over the match for now.” Satsuki didn’t know about the details of Rio and Takahisa’s argument either, but her mouth was

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curved into a gentle smile. She had kept what she had discussed with Rio after their match yesterday a secret, but Miharu had a feeling that their conversation played a part in this.

"...Okay." Miharu nodded with a sigh.

"Well, at least there's no need to worry about the result of the match. I can't imagine Haruto would ever lose, after all. If you still think you can win after watching Satsuki's battle yesterday, then you're too naive, bro!" Masato said, huffing through his nose.

"Seems like they're about to begin." Satsuki seemed to agree with Masato's statement as her lips quirked in a smile, before she turned her attention to the field. The referee had just started to explain the rules for the match.

"The only permitted weapons are training swords. Victory will be decided purely on sword technique. The hero, Sir Takahisa, is permitted to use divine arms to enhance his body, and Sir Amakawa is permitted to do the same with his enchanted sword. The match will be decided by either stopping on the verge of a decisive blow or landing a telling blow on an area other than the face. Please restrain your attacks to a nonlethal degree. Being disarmed alone will not count as defeat. Are these rules agreeable?" A young knight named Kyle was acting as the referee. He looked at Rio and Takahisa in confirmation of the rules.

"Yes!" Takahisa nodded eagerly while Rio inclined his head in a relaxed manner.

"Understood."

"Both sides, distance yourselves and ready your weapons," the referee said, raising his hand in the air. Then, once the two of them had enough distance between them, he confirmed that they were holding their weapons at the ready.

"Begin!" he yelled, swinging his hand down to signal the start of the match.

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“Hah!” Takahisa yelled angrily as he approached Rio. The physical enhancement of a divine arm was powerful and his speed easily surpassed human limits. Though not by much, his movements did show signs he had been training with a sword. However, from Rio’s point of view, he was full of openings.

I could end the match in an instant, but… In order to whittle down the stubborn Takahisa’s hostility a little, defeating him easily wouldn’t be enough. He had to make him surrender after pushing Takahisa to give him everything he had. With that decided, Rio took on his opponent’s ferocious attack head-on.

“Raaaagh!” Takahisa launched a countless number of sword attacks at Rio. Rio moved after every one, swinging his sword to divert the course of every attack made his way. Roughly ten seconds passed in this way.

“Kuh…” Takahisa felt like his attacks were having no effect at all—he didn’t even feel like he was swinging his sword at Rio anymore. He made eye contact with Rio’s all-seeing gaze and involuntarily retreated to put distance between them. However, Rio remained still. He stood there, waiting for Takahisa to make the next move; in part to restrain himself and not inadvertently defeat him.

“Do you plan on standing there the whole time?!” *What arrogance!* Takahisa made full use of his vastly-improved physical abilities to throw Rio off balance. Even then, Rio did not move to attack him. Takahisa ran in circles around Rio before launching an attack from behind, seeing that Rio was the most open there. “Gwah?!” It was as though Rio had eyes on the back of his head. Without even sparing a glance, he turned around and swung his sword, immediately knocking away the sword Takahisa was swinging. The recoil made Takahisa stumble backwards. When he made eye contact with Rio’s cold gaze, he grimaced in humiliation.

What was that look in his eyes?! Is he looking down on

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me when he's a murderer himself?! All while preaching about how he's trying to respect Miharu's opinion, this hypocrite! I won't... I won't let a murderer look down on me! How could I leave Miharu by the side of a murderer?! Not my... my Miharu...! He didn't want Miharu stolen away from him. With that single thought in mind, Takahisa was overcome with an almost overwhelming sense of paranoia as he moved.

He wanted to win. To fight—and win. Against this man... This hypocrite! He had to win to prove to Miharu that he was stronger than Rio. However, that was an impossible feat, to a degree that he was unaware of. To him, as long as he won, as long as he emerged victorious, Miharu would understand. Takahisa believed that beyond a doubt. No, that belief was the only thing that kept him going. However—

"Dammit, at this rate...!"

He couldn't win. Takahisa had the faint hunch that was the case.

But he didn't want to lose. He couldn't lose. That was how much resolution he had coming into this battle, putting his pride and his life on the line.

"Haaaah!" Takahisa heightened the ability of his divine arms enhancement and charged directly at Rio. He moved at the speed of a flying arrow, shooting straight for Rio.

However, Takahisa's passion had caused him to make a mistake. Both he and Rio had increased the strength of their physical bodies so that a hit from a training sword would hurt, but wouldn't be life-threatening. But Takahisa's current speed was creating enough kinetic energy to ignore the increased body strength, packing enough of a punch to deal a fatal wound.

With this speed, I can do it! Takahisa was certain of his victory and rejoiced. Without any hesitation at all, he poured every ounce of strength he had into the sword clutched between both his hands and swung it at Rio.

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“Wha…?!” His swinging sword cut through the air, leaving Takahisa speechless. There had been no resistance at all. There wasn’t even a trace of Rio left before him. Why?! Takahisa felt a sense of doubt that was closing in on anger, when—

“Guh!” Takahisa felt a light impact on his back, and in the next moment, he toppled off-balance. He had been thrust away by Rio, but the attack had clearly been held back. It wasn’t enough to be considered a telling hit. The referee hadn’t spoken up, either.

“What?!” Takahisa frantically scrambled to turn around with his sword at the ready, yelling in the direction of the contact. However, Rio was nowhere to be seen.

“Your field of view is too narrow,” Rio’s calm voice echoed through Takahisa’s back.

“Wah!” Takahisa swung his sword in a panic.

“In a battle where you’ve already become hot-headed, hastening your speed past the point of control will only make you lose sight of your target. That’s why your field of view is narrowing. The same can be said of you and Miharu…” Rio leaped backwards in a relaxed manner, avoiding Takahisa’s attack as he spoke.

“…Is that sarcasm? You have no right to be saying that!” Takahisa spat hatefully.

“Perhaps,” Rio agreed easily. To Takahisa, it felt like Rio was infuriatingly showing off the difference in their capabilities through his relaxed attitude. He charged at Rio vigorously.

“You’re not worthy of Miharu!”

“I know.”

“You murderous hypocrite!”

“I know that too.”

“I absolutely won’t allow it!”

“Do I need your permission?” That was true arrogance.

“That’s why I’m going to win this match!” Takahisa

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declared, swinging his sword at Rio. The drawn sword drew a sharp arc downwards towards his opponent.

“Wha?!” Of all the things to do, Rio released his sword. He stabbed the tip into the ground, letting it stand vertically. However, there was no stopping Takahisa’s blade any longer.

It was at this point that Takahisa finally feared that he might end up killing Rio. Suddenly, Rio stepped forward of his own accord.

But it wasn’t as though Rio intended on dying, either. Aiming for the moment when Takahisa’s fervor weakened slightly, he caught the blade of the sword between his hands.

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It was the god-like move any Japanese person would be familiar with. An impossible acrobatic feat that nobody sane would attempt in a real battle.

“Shirahadori?!” Satsuki yelled from the spectator seats. The group who had come from Earth—as well as Liselotte, who had been reborn into this world just like Rio—were obviously horrified, but even Charlotte and the others, who didn’t know the technique name, reacted similarly.

“Urgh!” When the movement of the blade stopped and Takahisa stiffened, Rio took the change to twist his wrists and arms to steal the sword from Takahisa. He then threw it on the ground beside them.

However, the rules said that disarming your opponent wasn’t enough to count as a victory. Despite that, one would normally lose their will to fight in this situation. Rio had been aiming for that outcome.

“Will you still continue?” Rio asked. If he wanted to pick up his sword, he was welcome to, that was what was implied.

“Don’t… look down on me!” Takahisa roared and frantically picked up his sword. He paid no attention to how his posture had collapsed when doing so, instead swinging at Rio again. He stubbornly refused to give up.

So he still won’t fold. Then… Rio grabbed his sword and leaped high, retreating for the moment.

“Are you running away?!” Takahisa ran at full speed in pursuit. He proceeded to brace his weapon overhead and swing it down, but that was exactly what Rio expected.

Rio stood still, sharpening his senses to see through Takahisa’s incoming sword. Then, once he had predicted its path, he held his own sword low. With precise timing, he kicked off the ground with great force, swinging his sword at an extreme speed. The result was the fierce clashing sound of metal echoing throughout the. In that moment, Rio and Takahisa both finished swinging their swords and had their backs facing each other. Then, one beat later, the sound of

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something stabbing into the ground reached Rio and Takahisa's ears. It was the sword that had been in Takahisa's hand.

"Uh. Ah..." Takahisa opened his mouth, looking between the blade stuck in the ground and the handle in his hand. Takahisa's sword had been smashed to pieces—smashing with it the heart of the one holding it.

"If you still want to continue, we can go barehanded next," Rio stated flatly.

"Ah... D-Damn it!" Takahisa readied his broken sword awkwardly, but he soon threw it against the ground. Rio suddenly started slowly walking towards him.

"I won't accept my defeat," Takahisa said to Rio, his whole body trembling in frustration. Rio unfalteringly continued to close the distance between them.

"I won't give up!" Despite those words, Takahisa seemed to have accepted defeat, as he didn't try to attack with just his bare hands. Rio pointed his sword at Takahisa indifferently.

"...Match, set! The victor is Sir Amakawa!" The referee announced victory loudly.

"I won't accept it, I won't accept it... I won't. You cannot be with Miharu. She's being fooled. I have to... I have to do something..." Takahisa hung his head as he muttered bitterly, as though he was reciting some kind of curse.

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After the match, Takahisa left the arena alone, heading for the castle guest rooms as though he was running away from Miharu and Satsuki. However, just as he was about to open the door to the guest rooms, Aki and Lilianna caught up.

"Wait, brother!"

"Please wait a moment, Sir Takahisa."

The three female knights were with them.

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“You…!” Takahisa finally came to a stop, turning around.

“Where do you think you’re going?” Lilianna asked with a sigh.

“…I was going back to my room.” Takahisa replied in shame.

“What were you going to do after returning?” Lilianna asked, as if she was soothing a pouting child.

“…Think of a plan to keep Miharu away from him,” Takahisa mumbled in response.

“So you still haven’t given up after all.” Lilianna sighed again, heavily this time.

“He’s… dangerous,” Takahisa muttered bitterly.

“Why do you say he’s dangerous?” Lilianna asked calmly.

“Because he’s a murderer!” Takahisa yelled.

Lilianna checked that there were no knights around them before exhaling in relief. “Please don’t utter such words in such a loud voice. He is an honorary knight of the Galarc Kingdom. Your silent departure after the duel was already uncommendable—the other party is an important honorary knight of another kingdom. Even if you are a hero, leaving without a word shows disrespect, which could cause an international incident.”

“But it’s the truth!”

“Whether it’s the truth or not is… Let’s go inside first. We can talk after you calm down. You three, stand guard outside the room. Refuse entry to all non-important visitors.”

Thus, the three female knights stood guard outside the room as Takahisa entered with Lilianna and Aki. Inside, Lilianna’s attendant was waiting. “Frill, tea for everyone.”

“Understood.” Frill moved to the kitchen under Lilianna’s orders.

“Now, please sit down.” Lilianna prompted Takahisa and Aki into the seats opposite her.

“…” Takahisa threaded his fingers and looked down in thought.

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“I’d like to ask one thing first—Sir Takahisa, is your desire to be together with Lady Miharu? Or would you be content as long as Lady Miharu is no longer by Sir Amakawa’s side?” Lilianna began, her question getting straight to the core of the matter.

“…If she had to go with him, then I believe she’d be better off being together with me.”

“Wasn’t the match just now to decide who Lady Miharu would be going with?”

“No! It was so he’d refuse being with Miharu if I won! I wasn’t trying to force Miharu into where she’d go!” As long as Rio refused to be with Miharu, Miharu would have followed Aki, who was coming with him. That was his ulterior motive—but he didn’t say that out loud.

“If you wish to be with Lady Miharu, would it not be best to just ask her sincerely?” Lilianna replied, giving a sound argument.

“T-That won’t work out, which is why we had a match!”

“And you lost that match.”

“Ugh…” Takahisa grimaced at the shot she’d taken at him.

“I believe it would be best to ask her honestly. If it doesn’t work, then you’ll have to give up.”

“I told you already! If I could do that…!” He wouldn’t have suffered so much. Miharu was already firm in her decision to be with Haruto, after all.

“Lady Miharu’s feelings are already so certain, neither you nor Lady Aki can convince her anymore. Is that correct?”

“Ugh…” Takahisa’s expression fell grimly. Lilianna took that as affirmation.

“In that case, how about we temporarily return to our kingdom to cool your head? We could even depart today, if you so wished. I believe it would be best for you to distance yourself from Lady Miharu for the time being.”

“I can’t do that!” Takahisa declined immediately.

“However, there’s no way to solve this through a

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discussion. A match… No, the duel you had couldn't solve this either. Doesn't that leave you with no other solution? You wouldn't forcefully bring Lady Miharu to Centostella unwillingly, would you?" There was no way such a selfish action would be approved of. That's what Lilianna had wanted to imply by saying that, but—

"…I see. I could always just bring Miharu to Centostella first. It's a fact that he's a murderer. Whatever reason he gives to justify it doesn't make it forgivable. And if I tell her my feelings and talk to her properly, she'll surely understand…" he started muttering to himself. It seemed like Takahisa took her words as a realistic option.

"That option is impossible. If it's discovered that you forcefully took her, it would truly become an international incident," Lilianna stated in a harsh tone.

"But there's no other option!"

"Yes, there is. There must be. The Takahisa I know would never resort to such cowardly actions. I have been looking after you over these last few months, after all. And, as royalty, I've come into contact with many people before. Which is why I know that you may be inexperienced in some areas, but you are definitely not a bad person. If you followed through with this action right now, you'll be fraught with guilt for the rest of your life." Lilianna's usual gentle demeanor was nowhere to be seen as she warned Takahisa with the look of a royal leader guiding others away from the wrong path.

"Lily…" *What do you know about me after just a few months?* He couldn't say that because he understood how devoted Lilianna had been to supporting him in that time.

"From what I can see, Sir Amakawa is an outstanding individual. That is why Lady Miharu, Lady Satsuki, and even Sir Masato have so much trust in him, no? And the fact that Sir Amakawa brought Lady Aki and the others to the castle for your and Lady Satsuki' sakes is the biggest proof of this,

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is it not?”

When Lilianna praised Rio, Takahisa’s face turned bitter again. Aki’s too. “...You don’t know, Lily. You don’t know him.”

“You can’t believe in him? In the man your precious Lady Miharu trusts so much?” Lilianna asked Takahisa.

“If I did, I wouldn’t be suffering so much right now!” Takahisa yelled as though he was seeking some kind of salvation.

“...I think it would be best for you to temporarily distance yourself from Lady Miharu after all. Won’t you return to the kingdom with me? Our kingdom may be closed off, but as long as you desire it, Lady Miharu would be welcomed to our kingdom as a guest at any time, even if she isn’t affiliated with us,” Lilianna suggested as a compromise.

“That’s not— That’s not good enough! If I can’t bring Miharu with me, then I won’t be going back to Centostella at all! In fact, I’ll quit being a hero and take Aki and Miharu with me to live by ourselves!”

“Wha...” Takahisa’s self-centered statement left even Lilianna wide-eyed in shock. Aki, who had been listening silently, also blinked in surprise.

“Did you not say that you would become the hero for our kingdom? You promised me that you would return to Centostella even if you were to reunite with Lady Miharu and the others during our visit to Galarc, no? Didn’t you promise that you would work together with me to make our kingdom better? Are you telling me that the promise was all a lie?!” Lilianna’s face twisted with sadness. The defection of a hero was the biggest loss that could happen to a kingdom, but even before that, she had believed she had built a relationship of trust with Takahisa.

“It wasn’t a lie! I don’t want to make it into a lie, so don’t make me a liar! I don’t want to do such a thing! That’s why— That’s why I want your cooperation!” Takahisa used his

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trump card—his position as a hero—to petition the first princess of the kingdom. It was practically coercion at this point.

"...Why are you so insistent that Lady Miharu cannot be with Sir Amakawa?" Lilianna asked after hesitating for a moment.

"Because there's no way that Miharu, someone born and raised in Japan, could find happiness being with a man who kills people without batting an eye. And anyway, once Miharu— once I tell her my feelings, she'll surely understand." Takahisa gave a terribly biased answer. To Lilianna's ears, it was a statement of pure ignorance.

She was a little curious as to what he meant by saying that Haruto was someone who could kill without question, as many knights had killed one or two people when driven by the need before. If he had cursed those knights by calling them murderers to their faces, it would have been taken as an affront.

"Do you believe there is any realistic possibility in your statement? Even if I were to cooperate with you, there'd be no way of hiding the fact Lady Miharu was taken away by force. And it would be impossible for you to live freely with Lady Miharu and Aki by quitting your post as a hero without my cooperation."

"I can do it. No matter how it plays out, I'll make sure I succeed. I have to," Takahisa answered with bloodshot eyes. He was dangerously unstable, held captive by his own intense egotism and belief that his thoughts were absolute. There was no way of telling whether he could be persuaded in this situation, and at the same time, he was at risk of losing himself, which would obviously be an issue. If he used the power of his divine arms to run wild, he could cause terrible damage.

"Reality is far more harsh than you realize. If you were to choose that option, your feelings of regret would be

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inevitable and you will also understand how amazing it was for Sir Amakawa to have kept Lady Miharu and the others in his care until now.”

“…I won’t know until I try.”

Where was that confidence of his coming from? “There are some things you can know without trying.” Lilianna sighed for the umpteenth time, shooting him down resolutely.

“You know, though, Lily. About the heroic power hidden within me. That my power can protect the people closest to me.”

“You just lost to Sir Amakawa moments ago. The special ability hidden in your divine arms is indeed powerful, but if someone as experienced as him faces you, then even a hero would lose. Please understand that. There are evil deeds in this world that cannot be dealt with simply through power, too. And a plan like this would fall apart the moment Lady Miharu or Satsuki caught word of it.” Lilianna raised her voice so that she could be heard clearly in the kitchen beyond.

“Even so, my answer is that I will protect them. We won’t reach an agreement like this, Lily.” Takahisa said, watching Lilianna with determination.

“…Lady Aki, do you have nothing to add to persuade Sir Takahisa?” Lilianna sought salvation from his little sister Aki, who had been observing the situation carefully. Aki ducked her head, hesitating for a moment.

“I’ll… I’ll be there, Takahisa… Is that not enough?” she asked, lifting her face slowly.

“…” Takahisa frowned painfully, but he had no choice but to shake his head. No, no it wasn’t enough… His fists shook.

“I see…” For a moment, Aki lowered her eyes as though she’d cry. But, after a while, she mustered a smile with everything she had.

“Then let’s kidnap Miharu together. Masato would object,

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so we'd have to leave him behind…"

"Wha…" Lilianna was speechless. Who were these siblings? How could they be so selfish for their own sakes? Perhaps that was simply human nature…

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“My family was destroyed once by that boy’s disappearance. The one who became my new family after that was you, brother. And the new family I’ve built up is going to be broken again… by none other than the same person. That’s why… there’s no other option. If you’re going to be serious about this, then I will, too,” Aki said, smiling brokenly.

“…Where are you going, Frill?” Takahisa turned around and called out to Frill, who was trying to quietly leave the kitchen and go outside. Frill came to a trembling halt.

“Ah, umm… We were out of tea leaves…”

“That’s fine—forget the tea. Come back.”

“O-Okay…” Frill dragged herself back to the middle of the room.

“Lily, were you trying to inform Miharu and Satsuki of this?” Takahisa seemed to think that Lilianna had given Frill the order herself, as though saying he was ready to begin his plan right away.

“…Will you not yield at all, Sir Takahisa? About returning to the Centostella Kingdom with me. The only thing waiting at the end of the road that you are trying to go down is destruction. There is no way you can fool your way through,” Lilianna said with a resigned sigh.

“I have to fool them! Because I have to protect everyone. So that they can all be happy!” Takahisa said resolutely.

“That’s just your…” Lilianna was about to say something, but broke off with a bitter face. She realized if she said it out loud, she could truly break the relationship she had formed with Takahisa.

No, it was already broken by Takahisa himself. Craving the happiness he’d lost, witnessing it fold into the hands of someone else before his very eyes made him struggle hideously. However, reality wasn’t going the way he wanted —so much so that he had temporarily, or perhaps permanently, gone crazy.

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Oh, what a pitiful person, Lilianna sympathized with a frown. But after several seconds passed, she spoke up.

"...I understand. As long as you don't mind taking sole blame for running wild when you are caught, then I give you permission to use our enchanted ship to take Lady Miharu away. However, no matter what kind of end awaits you, you will be the one to take full responsibility. This you must accept. I will also have you accept several other conditions in advance. If you break these conditions in the future, I will punish you without mercy. I may not be able to save you when you have your regrets later. Are you still willing to choose this option despite all this, Sir Takahisa?" Lilianna asked coldly, as though questioning Takahisa's resolution. For a moment, even Takahisa was overwhelmed by how she pressured him.

"...I am. I choose this," he answered.

"I have received your word. Ensure that you do not go back on it." Lilianna's tone was sharper than usual.

"Lily, I'm sure you know already, but telling Miharu and the others..."

"I will no longer attempt such a thing. Now that things have come to this, I must prepare myself for the worst, too. I will guide you through to the end." Lilianna shot down Takahisa's distrusting words immediately.

"...All right." Takahisa nodded his head, a bit frightened.

"Now, this is a reckless attempt to begin with, so please give me several hours at the most to make my preparations. There's no guarantee that we will succeed even with that, but I shall tell you the outline of the plan. Lady Aki will have an especially important role, so please be prepared," Lilianna explained. There was no turning back now.

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Three hours after Takahisa had formed his reckless

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abduction plan with Lilianna, Aki went to visit Satsuki's quarters alone to tell them that Takahisa would be returning to the Centostella Kingdom urgently.

"Huh? Takahisa's going back already?!" Satsuki yelled in shock. Five people were currently in the room: Rio, Miharu, Satsuki, Masato, and Aki.

"Umm, he was rather shocked that he lost to Haruto in the match…" Aki explained, glancing at Rio momentarily. When they made eye contact, she looked down guiltily.

"Hah… That's so pathetic, bro…" Masato said in exasperation, but he did feel sympathy for his brother as he sighed worriedly.

"I've decided that I will be going with him," Aki declared. They all stayed silent with uncomfortable expressions on their faces.

"Neither of you will be coming along, right?" Aki looked at Miharu and Masato to confirm.

"…Yeah. I'm sorry," Miharu refused sadly. It was something she had decided long ago, yet when it was time to say goodbye, it felt like her chest was about to burst.

"I… It's a tough choice, but I'm not going either." Masato didn't think it would benefit his brother if he changed his mind here and went with them, but he didn't say it out loud. Right now, he just wanted to run away.

"…I see." Aki's voice sounded both relieved and upset at the same time.

"But I'll come see you off," Masato said resolutely.

Aki took a deep breath and lifted her head, speaking clearly to them all. "Okay. Takahisa wants to apologize to everyone before we leave. Will you come with me?"

Rio and the others left Satsuki's quarters to follow Aki through the castle. They arrived at a section of the garden that surrounded the castle and spotted Takahisa standing there.

"Bro!" Masato called out and ran forward first.

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“Hey, everyone. And Haruto, too…” Takahisa gave a shady smile as he responded to them all.

“We heard the news. You’re returning to Centostella?” Satsuki asked a little unhappily.

“Yes. I’ve caused enough of a stir… So Lilianna said it would be best for me to leave everyone and cool my head temporarily. I’m sorry.” Takahisa bowed his head, biting on his lower lip. On top of that, he called out their names one by one and lowered his head, saying over and over again how truly sorry he was.

…*Why is he here alone, though?* Rio found it strange. Had he been waiting for Aki to bring them here this whole time? There had been no hesitation in Aki’s steps, which was also a little curious.

“Haruto, I’m sorry. I’ve said so many rude things to you.” Takahisa bowed his head at Rio as well. Had he calmed down in these few hours? Just as Rio thought that, he caught a glimpse of a murky darkness in Takahisa’s eyes as he bowed his head. It gave him an eerie feeling.

Despite feeling something unsettling, Rio bowed his head in return. “No, I acted out of line, too. May I ask what you were doing here already?”

“…The horse carriages are waiting in the center garden to take us to the harbor, but Lily’s currently talking to the king. I thought I’d take a short walk while I waited,” Takahisa answered with a slightly stiff face. He seemed a little uncomfortable about something. However, that did answer the question of why he was here.

“There you are, Lady Satsuki, Sir Haruto.” Charlotte appeared, calling Rio and Satsuki’s names. At that moment, Takahisa and Aki’s expressions clearly stiffened. Seeing that, Charlotte gave a pleasant smile.

“Is something the matter?” Being called out by name like this meant that she needed something. However, the fact she came all the way to the gardens outside the castle herself

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seemed a little strange. Well, it wasn't that strange if she had been guided by those who had spotted them in her search…

"I have something important to discuss with you two. May I have some of your time?" Charlotte tapped her right index finger against her mouth and batted her eyelashes up at Rio and Satsuki's faces.

"Umm, Takahisa and Aki are about to head to the Centostella Kingdom, so if it's not urgent, we would prefer to talk to the two of them a little more first…" said Satsuki. It was difficult for Rio to refuse because of his social position, but as a hero, Satsuki could refuse the princess without backlash.

"Oh, we're about to head off anyway, so it's okay. I'd rather not drag out our farewells too long, otherwise I'll be reluctant to leave…" Takahisa said with a slightly awkward, uneasy look.

"…I see. Then, this time we'll be saying farewell—and it's a bittersweet one. Next time, we'll be in a much better place. Everyone finally reunited again, thanks to Haruto. We have to take a moment to appreciate the good that came from that. Let's meet again soon, no matter what." Satsuki didn't seem to doubt that they would meet again, though her face darkened as she spoke.

"…Yeah." Takahisa and Aki both looked down and nodded, making their expressions hard to read. However, it seemed as though there was a shadow over their faces.

"See you later then, Takahisa. Aki," Satsuki said, lightly embracing the two of them.

"We'll see you again someday soon," Rio also said to them in parting.

Takahisa responded with a slightly stiff "yeah," but Aki averted her gaze in silence. Seeing Aki's reaction made Miharu want to say something, but—

"Now, shall we go?" Charlotte said, prompting Rio and Satsuki to move.

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Aishia. I know we're in the castle, but I'm a little worried about the lack of guards. Could you stay beside Miharu and the others in your spirit form and let me know if something happens? If something happens, you can materialize too, Rio said to Aishia within him.

Okay, got it, Aishia replied immediately. In that time, Charlotte took up her place to his left side while Satsuki, looking reluctant, moved to stand at Rio's right side.

As a result, with the exception of Aishia in her spirit form, the only ones left were Takahisa, Aki, Masato, and Miharu. Just then, Aki let out a noise in realization.

"Ah!"

"What's the matter?" Masato asked Aki after his small body flinched.

"I forgot something in my room. I have to get it before we leave. Come with me." Aki grabbed Masato's right arm.

"Ah, hey! Aki! What are you doing?!" Masato asked as he was dragged towards the castle.

"Try and be tactful for once. You've noticed too, haven't you? Just five minutes is enough." Aki glanced back at Takahisa and Miharu.

"Ugh. Fine, then." Masato looked at the two of them before scratching at his head with his left hand and sighing. Meanwhile, an awkward air hung over Takahisa and Miharu, who had been left behind.

"Do you want to go for a walk?" Takahisa asked Miharu.

"Sure, okay..." Miharu nodded awkwardly, then followed Takahisa's lead around the garden. Miharu left a bit of distance between them as they walked. One, then two minutes passed in silence; their conversations didn't last long even back when they were in Japan, but their extended silence now was probably influenced by how their relationship had become stilted since their reunion here.

"Hey, Takahisa. How far are we walking?" Miharu asked after a while. They had come all the way to the outskirts of

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the castle grounds. There was no one in the area and they were right next to the wall that surrounded the castle.

“Ah, umm. I hadn’t decided. Sorry…” Takahisa came to a stop and said awkwardly.

“Umm, should we go back? We’re pretty far from the castle now…” Miharu suggested.

“No… Say, Miharu. Why do you want to be together with him?” Takahisa suddenly asked.

“Why… Why…? Umm, because I want to, I guess.” Miharu thought seriously before giving a redundant answer.

“That isn’t a reason.” *So she would choose him over me after all.* Takahisa felt painful emotions swirling in his chest once more, but he feigned composure as he spoke to Miharu. His voice was shaking.

“But that’s what it is. I can’t explain it well in words.” No, there was one accurate way of expressing it, but it wasn’t something that should be admitted to others lightly. However…

Perhaps she needed to tell Takahisa after all. Miharu hesitated for a moment, but she decided to say it herself.

However, Takahisa was the one to mention it. “Umm… Do you like him? Is that why you want to be with him?”

“Err… Yeah. That’s right—I like him. That’s why I want to be with him.” Normally she would be too embarrassed to admit it out loud, but for some reason, she said it now without feeling any hint of shyness.

“Is that because he’s Amakawa Haruto? Or because of his current self?” Takahisa’s expression stiffened. He had been too embarrassed to talk about love to Miharu while they were in Japan, but he was being fairly intrusive with his questions now. Miharu’s eyes wavered in surprise, but she soon smiled and answered.

“It’s both. I think I love both of them. The Haruto from before he was reborn, and the Haruto now. I fell in love with the same person twice.” Because Haru-kun exists, she could

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love the current Haruto even more. Because Haruto exists, she could love Haru-kun even more. That was her thinking.

However, that answer gouged a hole in Takahisa's heart. It was unacceptable. There was absolutely no way he could accept it. He gritted his teeth.

"But… but…" he began to say, his shoulders shaking like a cornered criminal.

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Meanwhile, Charlotte brought Rio and Satsuki to the rooftop garden, which was reserved for royalty.

"See? Isn't it a lovely view of the outside of the castle? You can just see the enchanted ship harbor from here, too." Charlotte walked to the outskirts of the rooftop garden and turned back to smile at Rio and Satsuki behind her.

"It certainly is lovely, but… What was the important matter that you wanted to discuss, Char?" Satsuki asked, despite being impressed by the view from the garden. In Satsuki's case, it was a scenery she witnessed every day from the top floor of the tower she resided in, which was even taller than the garden, so she wasn't that impressed.

"Hehe. Now now, there's no need for such haste. I've prepared somewhere for us to sit over here, so let's take a seat first. Now, come this way." Charlotte brushed them off in an aloof manner, leisurely inviting them to the seats that had been prepared in a spot to oversee the scenery.

Haruto.

Just then, Aishia's voice echoed in Rio's head.

…What's wrong? Rio walked behind Charlotte as he answered immediately.

Takahisa is taking Miharu outside of the castle.

Is he trying something?

I don't know. They're talking right now. Wanna hear?

Huh, I can do that…?

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You and I are connected, so I can share the things I see and hear with you.

As soon as Aishia said that, muffled voices that didn't belong to her filled Rio's head. It was Takahisa's voice.

"Umm… Do you like him? Is that why you want to be with him?" Hearing him suddenly say something like that startled Rio.

Hey, Aishia. We should respect their privacy… He didn't think that he should be listening in on this conversation, but before he could say anything more to Aishia, someone else spoke up.

"Err… Yeah. That's right—I like him. That's why I want to be with him."

It was Miharu's voice. Rio swallowed his breath with a gasp. He was filled with an indescribable sense of guilt for eavesdropping on someone else's conversation like this—and felt the same about Aishia.

"Is that because he's Amakawa Haruto? Or because of his current self?"

"It's both. I think I love both of them. The Haruto before he was reborn, and the Haruto now. I fell in love with the same person twice." While Rio's thoughts were occupied, Miharu and Takahisa's conversation continued. He was now certain they were discussing him.

Aishia, I really shouldn't be listening to this conversation after all. I think you should also stay out of hearing reach and just watch over them from a distance, too. Rio passed on a message for Aishia to suspend her transmission of the conversation, but—

"But— But he's a murderer!" Takahisa began speaking of Rio in contempt. The situation was taking a suspicious turn.

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"But— But he's a murderer!" Takahisa released the

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emotions he had been forcing down as he spoke ill of Rio in front of Miharu.

"…" Miharu looked extremely sad.

"Hey, Miharu—open your eyes! You're being tricked by him!" Takahisa objected in frustration.

"So your apology to Haruto earlier was just for show."

"That— I had to. I had to do what was necessary."

"What was necessary?" Miharu stared intensely at Takahisa, making him lose his nerve at the illusion of being seen through completely.

"T-That's irrelevant right now! I'm asking you to come to your senses and come with me instead!" Takahisa's voice trembled as he yelled, at his wit's end.

"I won't be going with you. You're the one who needs to open your eyes, Takahisa," Miharu said firmly.

"You're being deceived, Miharu! He's a murderer!"

"I'm not being deceived."

"You are! He acts like a good person, but he'll turn around and kill people if he needs to. He said there's someone he wants to kill. Is that not hypocritical of him?! You're being fooled into staying with a murderer, no matter how you think about it!"

"So what? He saved me. Aki and Masato, too—we were all saved by him. When we were abducted by the slave merchant, he was fighting out of our line of sight. Someone may have died in that battle. Haruto may have been the one that killed them. Would you still insult Haruto, knowing that?"

"I'm saying this with your well-being in mind, Miharu. We live in different worlds compared to him! He's a person from this world, and we're people who lived in Japan. We may return to Japan someday. He would be nothing but a dirty criminal in Japan."

"…How can you say such horrible things?" Miharu's shock made her back away from Takahisa to create distance

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between them.

“It’s because I love you, Miharu! I’m in love with you! And I always have been! From the moment we met until now—all this time!” Takahisa confessed his love for Miharu at the most inappropriate moment.

“…I’m sorry. There’s just no way.” Miharu’s fright caused her to reject him in a short tone.

“Wh… Are you saying you’d choose him?! When he wouldn’t choose you?!”

“H-He doesn’t need to choose me! I know there are lots of people around Haruto who are more attractive than me! I’ve accepted that already! But I… I…!” Takahisa’s insensitive statement made Miharu raise her voice angrily.

“You’re my number one! If Lily is number two, then you’re number one by a landslide! I always have you at the forefront of my mind, I’m always thinking of your well-being the most…!”

“You say what you’re doing is for my sake, but in the end it’s all for your own! Isn’t that the hypocrisy you hate so much?” Miharu pointed out Takahisa’s contradictory behavior.

“I’m different! Don’t lump me in with him! I’m not a murderer! I wouldn’t ever kill a person!”

“…I’ve had enough,” Miharu muttered in disbelief. Her emotions had surpassed shock and moved on to disappointment. She weakly turned on her heel to depart.

“Even after everything I’ve said, you still won’t come to your senses?” Takahisa said to her back, suppressing his anger.

“I don’t want to talk to you anymore. Not until *you* come to your senses and apologize to Haruto sincerely. Honestly, I don’t want you to take Aki with you, but she adores you so much. Make sure you don’t make her cry. Now… goodbye.” Miharu came to a stop but didn’t look back. Takahisa’s entire body trembled.

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“Huh…?” Miharu felt a strong impact against her back. Then, she felt a floating sensation—like something was carrying her.

“T-Takahisa?! W-What are you doing?! Stop it!” Takahisa had picked her up, holding her as he stood looking up at the castle walls.

He had only been a few meters away from Miharu earlier. Aishia was lying in wait in her spirit form, but taking into account the time lag of turning from spirit form to materialized form, it was impossible for her to interrupt Takahisa’s sudden movement boosted by his divine arms’ physical enhancement.

“I thought— I thought you’d understand after I told you my feelings. But if you still don’t get it, I’ll just move on to the next step of the plan!” Takahisa said with Miharu in his arms, then made a full-powered sprint towards the wall. His eyes burned with a hollow light.

The castle walls were roughly 10 meters tall. They were generally constructed to look shorter on the inside and taller on the outside, so it wasn’t that difficult to break out from the inside.

However, to Miharu, who had her movements restricted as she was being forcibly carried, the looming wall approaching nearer incited nothing but fear. Just before Takahisa leaped, Miharu curled up and squeezed her eyes shut.

I can’t just let this happen! Miharu knew she needed to inform someone of this situation, so she frantically tried to do something. She thought of making something happen using the spirit arts she learned from the spirit folk.

Bang!

“W-What?!” The sound of something tearing exploded loudly, making Takahisa flinch for a moment and stand on top of the castle wall. Because her spirit arts weren’t fully-developed yet, she had only created the sound of exploding

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air.

The thought of Miharu creating that sound didn't even cross Takahisa's mind, so he looked around in confusion.

"Hey. Who's that up there?! There's someone on the walls! He's carrying a girl!" One of the soldiers on guard had heard the explosion and spotted Takahisa on top of the wall. Miharu took the chance to create a ball of light in her hands and float it high into the air. It would only last for a minute, but it served as a landmark.

"Gah, what?! Damn it!" When Takahisa spotted Miharu making the ball of light in her hands, he paled. But he couldn't afford to stand around and be caught, so he proceeded to jump off the castle wall and run at full speed towards the harbor where the Centostella Kingdom's enchanted ship waited.

This section of the castle wall was the closest to the lake, and Lilianna had told him of the shortest path to the harbor. It would take less than a minute to get there.

"I'm bringing you with me! I'm bringing you with me no matter what!" The preparations to depart were completed already, so as long as they reached the ship, the plan would succeed. Takahisa believed that as he charged ahead at full speed.

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Meanwhile, a few moments before that, Rio and the others stood in the rooftop garden. Rio had seated himself with Satsuki and Charlotte, but his ears were turned towards Miharu and Takahisa's conversation. No—it would be more accurate to say his entire mind was occupied with it.

He hadn't wanted to eavesdrop, but the conversation took such an unsettling turn that he couldn't help but listen to the conversation that was being transmitted to him in installments.

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Aishia, what's the situation right now? He asked Aishia around when Miharu rejected Takahisa's confession.

It's as you hear. The two are arguing with each other.

Is everything okay?

No threatening moves have been made yet. I cannot materialize and appear to them yet, so I'll continue to observe like this, Aishia answered flatly.

I-I see… Rio felt relieved for the time being, but that moment didn't last long.

"T-Takahisa?! W-What are you doing?! Stop it!" Miharu's voice echoed in his head. Rio flinched.

Aishia, what happened?! Rio asked instantly. Aishia's reply came immediately.

Takahisa suddenly grabbed Miharu and picked her up. He's climbing the castle wall now. In the direction of the ship harbor.

Right after that—*Bang*! A sound echoed throughout the grounds.

"What… was that…" Satsuki reflexively leapt to her feet, looking in the direction of the sound.

"Wait, Miharu?! And Takahisa?! W-What is this?!" Satsuki reflexively cast her physical enhancement to see Takahisa carrying Miharu on top of the castle wall over a hundred meters away. Rio also stood up and confirmed just that.

"…Has something happened?" Charlotte stood up and asked Satsuki.

"Takahisa grabbed Miharu and is standing on top of the castle wall! They just jumped down from it! He said he was going back to Centostella earlier!" Satsuki's tone was rough due to her confusion.

"Indeed, the enchanted ship harbor is right outside of the castle wall over there, but…" Charlotte replied, giving her geographic point of view.

"Is he trying to kidnap Miharu?! What is he thinking?!"

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“You can’t say that for sure… but what is that ball of light? It’s being fired into the sky continuously. Is it some kind of signal magic? It’s getting closer to the harbor,” Charlotte said, analyzing the situation.

It’s dangerous to attack while they’re running. You can simply secure Miharu after they’ve boarded the ship and let down their guard.

Wait, they’re at the harbor already? Rio was already exchanging orders with Aishia, but in that short amount of time Takahisa had arrived at the harbor.

“Miharu’s sending out a signal. I gave her a magic artifact that could do something like that. They’re probably at the harbor already,” Rio explained.

“Sir Takahisa has probably enhanced his body with his divine arms, so if he’s at the harbor already, I fear the ship will depart at any moment. No doubt the workers at the harbor are unaware of the situation, so we cannot stop them if they depart now,” Charlotte pointed out.

“W-What do we do?! This is no time to be chatting leisurely!” Satsuki yelled in shock.

“There’s nothing we can do from here…” said Charlotte. It seemed like there were no options left.

“…I’ll go.” Rio thought silently for a moment, before volunteering himself to pursue. No sooner had he said that, he retreated from the outer perimeter of the rooftop garden. Then, he drew his sword from the sheath at his waist.

“Just what do you intend on doing… Wha?!” Charlotte had been staring at Rio suspiciously when Rio suddenly burst into a dash, making her flinch. Her usual age-inappropriate coquettish attitude fell silent as she let out a cute shriek the moment Rio burst past her.

“A-Are you trying to kill yourself?! Even with the physical enhancement of your enchanted sword, you…!” She soon snapped back to her senses and yelled at Rio, who had already leaped from the rooftop garden and fallen out of

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hearing range.

However, after Rio had leaped and soared through the air for a while, he poured a tremendous amount of magic essence into his sword and used wind spirit arts to create a large gust of wind, propelling him forward through the air.

Satsuki stared with a dazed smile for a few moments before bursting into laughter at the sight of Rio leaping over the castle wall. She cheered him on even though he was out of earshot. “Ahaha… Go for it, Haruto! I’m leaving it to you!”

“His actions make no sense at all…” Beside Satsuki, Charlotte watched Rio fly through the air using his sword in a daze. However, her gaze gradually grew heated.

“…How wonderful.” Forgetting her position as the second princess, she was simply captivated by the sight of the Black Knight, whose very existence seemed to turn the tables everywhere.

◇ ◇ ◇

Meanwhile, one of the enchanted ships in the possession of the Centostella Kingdom had just made an emergency departure by Takahisa’s forceful order and was now gaining altitude over the water. On board, Miharu confronted Takahisa on the deck of the ship.

When Miharu had been abducted from the castle, Aishia had suspended the transmission of their conversation to communicate with Miharu telepathically. Aishia could indeed materialize and rescue Miharu from here, but that would make the explanations to follow quite difficult. They decided she would observe quietly as long as Miharu’s life and body were not infringed upon. However—

If Miharu’s screams reach your heart, then you come and save her.

The message that Aishia telepathically sent to Rio may have assisted in his decision to act of his own accord.

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Miharu, Haruto will reach this ship soon, Aishia encouraged.

Okay! Haruto was coming. Haru-kun was coming. Miharu was incredibly happy to hear that, and used it to encourage herself. However, she had to first condemn Takahisa for his barbaric act.

“What were you thinking, doing something like this? Did you really find it so unforgivable that I would be beside Haruto?” She asked, trying to find the true intention of his actions.

“Unforgivable? Of course it is! Didn’t I just tell you I’ve been in love with you from the moment we met? And yet, he’s the one that’s always occupied your heart. There’s no way I can forgive it! For what— For what did I…!” Takahisa had been cornered with nowhere further to go and started to panic. The instability that he had rarely shown in Japan had been exposed by the stress of a single person’s pursuit in this world, awakening into a deep-rooted delusion.

“I am not your property, Takahisa.” Miharu witnessed her friend from Japan turn into a completely different person before her and felt helpless. Although he had completely transformed out of jealousy and greed, Takahisa was still Aki and Masato’s older brother. Though she had never seen him romantically, that didn’t change the fact he was a close friend of hers.

“Ngh… Argh! Fuck! Lily’s not on board… Aki’s not on board, either. It wasn’t supposed to go like this…!” When Miharu voiced her clear rejection of him, the pain caused Takahisa to escape into another reality. However, there wasn’t a single reality left that favored him right now.

The ship’s crew were scrambling in a panic on the deck, discussing whether they should turn back and land on the water again as Lilianna was not on board. It was then that someone landed on the deck. It was Rio. The crew froze in utter shock.

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“Haru-kun!” Miharu yelled.

“Wha…” Takahisa’s eyes widened in shock, before he glared at him, enraged. For him, Rio was the root of every problem he had. He would never approve of his existence.

“I came… to save you.” Rio smiled awkwardly as he spoke to Miharu in a gentle tone. He wore the same expression as when he first saved Miharu from the slave traders.

“…Right.” Miharu nodded in a daze. Then, Rio walked towards Miharu slowly, showing no care or caution towards Takahisa at all.

“Coming all this way…!” *Just to steal her away?! What a nightmare!* Takahisa grit his teeth before yelling “Laevateinn!” and summoning his divine arms. It was a sword with a beautiful red blade—a one-handed sword that was roughly one meter long. Takahisa swung the sword and slashed at Rio, but Rio flicked his sword without even a glance, deflecting Takahisa’s incoming blade.

“Gah?!” Takahisa was blown backwards and stumbled. In that time, Rio stood before Miharu, but Takahisa’s eyes had yet to lose their aggressive light as they fixed on Rio with loathing.

“…Do you think it’s okay for me to injure him?” Even Rio questioned Miharu with a fed-up look on his face. He was finding Takahisa rather persistent.

“H-Huh?” Miharu was unsure of what he had asked and just blinked blankly. The next moment, Takahisa once again tried to close in on Rio to attack.

“Get away from Mi— Guh?!” Rio closed in on him instead, landing a counter on his face with all his might—Takahisa flew across the deck and crashed into the wall. His nose was twisted rather unnaturally, blood flowing out. He seemed to have cut the inside of his mouth too, as a fair amount of blood was streaming from there as well.

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A normal person would have had their neck snapped, but his physical enhancement meant he got off with just a broken nose. Damage that could be restored with healing magic.

Rio had punched a hero on impulse, but it was an emergency situation, so he deemed it justifiable. It was one of the rare occasions where Rio had acted without thinking.

"...Shall we return? Come this way." Rio drew near Miharu and walked along the deck at a leisurely pace. The ship crew had trembled in fear at the sight of Rio punching the hero, but after a moment, they exploded in cheers and applause.

"Well done!"

"If you're going back down to the ground, we can assist!"

"What kind of hero would forcefully kidnap a young lady like that?!"

The ship's crew seemed to have their own thoughts about Takahisa's rampage, as they praised Rio highly.

"Haha. We'll go back like this. Hold on tight, Miharu." With those parting words, Rio leaped down from the enchanted ship with Miharu clinging to him. The crew rushed to lean over the side, watching them fall in a panic. But, once they spotted Rio soaring nimbly through the use of his sword, they cheered even louder for him.

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Epilogue: Rebirth of Childhood Friends

Rio had his left arm wrapped around Miharu as he used his right hand to skillfully control his sword, making a gentle return to the Galarc royal castle.

“...I wonder what will happen after this,” Rio asked Miharu with a half-resigned expression as they approached the castle. How could they explain the circumstances to the people of the Galarc and Centostella kingdoms?

“Yeah... I wonder what’ll happen.” It felt like the situation would grow completely out of hand. Miharu imagined it with a stiff smile.

“Perhaps it was excessive of me to punch Takahisa.” Despite his words, Rio had a slight smile on his face.

“I think that was fine. Violence is necessary sometimes...” Violence didn’t seem to be her strong point, as Miharu was nodding as though to convince herself.

“I’ll make sure you’ll never be in a situation where you need to act violent, so don’t worry,” Rio immediately interjected.

“But I think I’d like to defend myself, at least. I want to learn properly. From Haru-kun... Ah, umm. From Haruto.” Miharu requested timidly, watching for Rio’s reaction.

“...I don’t mind,” Rio suddenly said.

“Huh?” Miharu gasped.

“I don’t mind if you call me Haru-kun sometimes. I’m sure there’ll be times where you want to reminisce about the past.” Rio’s voice was a little bashful as he spoke.

“Is that because you see me as your childhood friend?”

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And did that mean he would face Miharu as Amakawa Haruto? Miharu lifted her face right up to Rio's.

"Ahaha." Rio laughed, trying to brush off Miharu's question. Come to think of it, the Miharu that Amakawa Haruto knew always brought her face close like this when she asked questions, even without her knowing of it.

"I think the way that you try to laugh off questions is a bad habit of yours, Haru-kun," Miharu pouted a little.

Rio looked up at the sky before returning Miharu's close-distance gaze. "I can at least promise to do my best to meet your demands, seeing as you say you want to be together in the future as well. Will that do for you?"

"...Y-Yes. We can start there..." When Miharu made eye contact with him up close, she ducked her head out of embarrassment. Such actions were exactly reminiscent of the girl that Amakawa Haruto knew.

Your feelings reached Haruto properly. It was worth transmitting your conversation with Takahisa, Aishia's voice echoed.

"My... conversation with Takahisa...?" Miharu cocked her head in suspicion for a moment. "Y-You were listening?! You heard my conversation with Takahisa?!" She remembered what she had said to Takahisa and turned bright red.

"Ahaha." Rio once again laughed to gloss over the situation. Miharu once again unconsciously drew her face near Rio's.

"Answer me!"

"Speaking of which, weren't you discussing things with Aishia before I ever named myself with the Amakawa family name?" Rio suddenly remembered.

"Huh?! T-That's not... true..." Miharu's eyes were clearly wavering.

"Well, I'll ask Aishia for details later. We'll consider it even with that."

"It's totally not even at all!" *I basically confessed to him!*

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No, but I didn't say it in front of him, so maybe it doesn't count? Miharu tried to persuade herself as her face flushed red.

"Then forgive me, Mii-chan." Rio gave a shy smile before uttering Miharu's nickname teasingly.

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Afterword

Hello everyone. Thank you for everything, as always. This is Yuri Kitayama. Thank you for picking up *Seirei Gensouki: Spirit Chronicles Volume 10 — Forget-Me-Not of Rebirth*.

Since Volume 1 went on sale in October of 2015, this series has finally achieved the ten volume mark. The story also reached a turning point at the same time, and in this volume I crossed one of the multiple story mountains I had planned from when I first started writing. This was one of the stages I wanted to write up to when the novelization was decided, so it's an emotional moment for me.

However, Seirei Gensouki hasn't ended as of this volume. The next goal is Volume 20! How far I can release will also depend on the sales of the series, so I would be most grateful to everyone for sticking through with the story until its completion.

And now, to change the topic abruptly: I will be releasing a new light novel through Kadokawa's MF Bunko J called "Miryou Sukiru de Ikinari Sekai Saikyou" on March 24th, one week before this volume goes on sale.

This will be my second work and first time writing in first person, and it will have a lighter tone than the dramatic style of Seirei Gensouki, but I hope you will find it an interesting read of right versus wrong in a fantasy world battle summoning story.

With that aside, as the two release dates are close, HJ Bunko and MF Bunko J have worked together to make a collaborative release of Seirei Gensouki Volume 10 and Miryou Sukiru Volume 1 come to fruition.

The specifics involve purchasing both volumes to receive a

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bonus collaborative short story of roughly 20,000 characters, so please check out Miryou Sukiru (the bonus will not be available forever, so apologies in advance).

The collaborative short story features the strongest characters in Seirei Gensouki—Rio and Aishia— traveling through the Wilderness when they wander into the world of Miryou Sukiru and get involved in the story there. For the enjoyment of the readers, I've included quite a number of factors that relate to the main story of Seirei Gensouki too, so I believe it will stir up quite a number of theories.

Now, I must wrap up here, so... Hopefully we'll meet again for Volume 11!

Yuri Kitayama
March 2018

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Bonus Short Stories

You Pervert!

Rio had finished his chores for the day in the stone house and was taking a breather on the sofa in the living room. Draped in his favorite blanket, he felt a light drowsiness overcome him and napped for half an hour or so.

"Hmm…?"

At some point in time, Aishia and Latifa had sat down on either side of him and fallen asleep against his shoulders. It was just the three of them in the living room.

…I can't get up at this rate.

Seeing the two of them sleeping so soundly made him reluctant to stand up and wake them. But at the same time, they'd have cricks in their necks if they continued to sleep like this.

Maybe I should carry them to bed instead? Rio pondered.

"Oh, you're awake, Rio," Celia said, walking in along with Sara.

"Yes. Where has everyone else gone?" Rio asked, looking around the living room.

"We were just having tea in Orphia's room, but we ran out of snacks, so we came out to restock," Sara replied with a giggle.

"I see. While you're here, could you take this blanket off of me? I can't seem to move right now."

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“Sure, hold on.” At Rio’s request, Celia approached to take the blanket off him.

“…Mm. Morning.” Aishia slowly blinked her eyes open.

“Morning, Aishia. Still sleepy?” Rio asked, watching Aishia rub her eyes.

“Yeah…” Aishia nodded, still half asleep.

“Can you change into your spirit form and enter me for a moment? I’m going to carry Latifa to bed.”

“All right.” Aishia immediately disappeared. With that, Rio was free to move.

“Okay. I’m going to take Latifa to bed, then.” He turned to her and lifted her up in his arms in a familiar manner. Latifa’s mouth relaxed into a happy smile as she entrusted herself to Rio.

“She sleeps so happily.” Celia watched Latifa’s sleeping face and smiled.

“She sometimes feigns it, though,” Sara said with a sigh.

“She is a fox werebeast, after all,” Celia laughed in amusement.

“I’ll be going, then,” Rio said, and started walking towards Latifa’s room. Meanwhile, Sara went to grab snacks from the kitchen and headed back to Orphia’s room with Celia. Orphia and Alma were waiting inside.

“Welcome back, you two,” Orphia called out to the two of them with a warm smile.

“…What’s with the blanket?” Alma asked, seeing Celia.

“Ah, it’s Rio’s…”

The blanket was still warm from Rio’s body heat; she had folded it while Sara had gone to get the snacks. Rio hadn’t returned, so she ended up carrying it with her—almost as though she couldn’t bear to part with it. Sara, Orphia, and Alma’s gazes naturally gathered on the blanket.

“Now that I think about it, there was no need to bring it with me. Rio might be back already, so I should go leave it in

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the living room," Celia said with a high pitch to her voice. She felt embarrassed for some reason.

"Hehe, why don't you take the opportunity to try sleeping with Rio's blanket? It's still warm, right? I'm sure it'd feel wonderful," Orphia said to Celia with a mischievous smile.

Celia blinked a few times before blushing red. "Huh? I-I can't do that!"

"Then how about you, Sara? Alma?" Orphia asked the two of them.

"W-What are you saying, Orphia?" Sara asked bashfully, seemingly shaken by that. Alma pretended that she hadn't heard to avoid digging her own grave.

"Really? Then I'll borrow it and sleep with it," Orphia giggled, looking at Celia.

"Y-You can't do that! Pervert!" Celia hugged the blanket to herself tightly.

"Hehe, it was just a joke," Orphia said in amusement.

"...Geez." Celia's cheeks remained scarlet as she pouted.

"Orphia looks serious, but she can be quite the prankster," Sara sighed tiredly.

The longer she held onto it, the more likely the conversation would take a strange turn. That thought made Celia stand up. "Ahaha... I'm going to leave the blanket in the living room. Rio might be back by now."

"Too bad for you, Sara."

"It's not like that!"

Leaving the bickering girls behind her, Celia returned to the living room alone.

"Rio's still not here..."

No one was in the living room. Celia headed towards the sofa Rio had been sleeping on earlier. She was about to place it down on the sofa, when—

"...Hmph."

The warmth of the blanket was so comforting, she hesitated to let go. Celia stared at it. After several seconds,

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she suddenly hugged it close and buried her face in the blanket.

"…Warm."

And it also smelled like Rio, probably. Sara and Latifa would know for sure…

Wait, what am I doing?! Stop! Now I'm the pervert!

Celia snapped out of it and hurriedly brought the blanket away from her face. But even then, she couldn't help yearn for that warmth, feeling envious of Aishia and Latifa, who always clung to Rio without reserve.

"O-One more time, just one…"

Celia gently brought the blanket close to her face again. But when the door to Latifa's room opened with a *clack!* she flinched upright and froze.

"…Huh? Professor? You're still here."

Rio cocked his head curiously at Celia standing alone in the living room. Thankfully, he hadn't seen any of what Celia had herself dubbed perverted.

Celia exhaled in relief and controlled her thumping heart as much as she could to give a calm answer. "Y-Yeah. I accidentally took your blanket to Orphia's room, so I was bringing it back."

One Scene of the Banquet

On the first night of the banquet hosted by the Kingdom of Galarc, when Satsuki was first introduced, Miharu stood beside Rio with Liselotte, the three of them moving together.

There was a constant stream of nobility coming to greet them, so they had yet to move since the beginning of the banquet, receiving one noble after another on the upper floor.

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The main guest of the night was the hero, Satsuki, so she had been gathering the most attention, but Miharu had gathered nearly as much attention from the nobles. While part of the reason was because she was Satsuki's friend, her elegant beauty also played a large part.

"Goodness me, what a wonderful sight. That black hair on such a maiden…"

"Indeed. Both Lady Satsuki's radiance and Lady Miharu's elegance—there must be plenty of young men falling for them."

The middle-aged nobles with families praised Miharu in awe. Many of the nobles had fallen for her exotic beauty, which was rarely seen in the Strahl region, and were staring at her with heated gazes. But at the same time, Rio was garnering envy for being waited upon by both Miharu and Liselotte, one of the most beautiful bachelorettes of the Galarc Kingdom.

The gazes I can feel… are probably not just my imagination.

Rio could guess the reason behind most of those gazes and mustered a pained smile. Liselotte must have noticed, too, but she was used to such situations and looked perfectly calm. Meanwhile, Miharu hadn't seemed to notice the heated gazes yet.

"What's the matter, Haruto?" Miharu immediately noticed Rio looking at her and spoke up. He was a little surprised at how aware Miharu had been of his gaze, but smiled anyway.

"It's nothing. Are you tired?"

"I'm fine," Miharu replied with a grin. Seeing her smile from close-up made an indescribable emotion swell within Rio. Whether it was Amakawa Haruto or Rio's, he didn't know.

"That's good to hear," Rio replied with a smile, hiding the feelings residing in his heart.

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Magic Words to Make Omurice Taste Better

Not long before Miharu was to attend the banquet at the Galarc Kingdom, Rio had left the stone house on his own, so Miharu, Latifa, and Celia prepared lunch a little later than usual. Once he returned, Rio waited in the dining room for them to finish cooking.

“Thanks for waiting, Onii-chan!”

Latifa appeared with a tray, accompanied by Miharu and Celia.

“Ta-da! Onii-chan’s favorite—omurice! Miharu taught Celia and I how to make it in a delicious way! What do you think?” Latifa showed off the omurice on the tray with a carefree smile.

“Thank you—it looks delicious. And thanks to Miharu and Professor Celia too.”

“I-It was nothing. I was just a little curious about how it was made after hearing omurice was your favorite and finding it delicious when I tried it. I didn’t do anything in particular,” Celia replied shyly to Rio’s gratitude.

“That’s not true. Celia made most of the chicken rice.” Miharu added with a giggle.

“Hey hey, Onii-chan. Can I put ketchup on top of your omurice?” Latifa asked, eyes sparkling.

“Yeah, sure.” Rio nodded easily. Latifa proceeded to write “I love you” in ketchup over the soft, half-cooked egg.

“Done. It’s filled with our love, so make sure you eat it all up!” Latifa grinned, looking into Rio’s face. Celia and Miharu both looked embarrassed at her words.

“Got it,” Rio replied awkwardly. He picked up the spoon to hide his embarrassment.

“Ah, wait! This isn’t finished yet,” Latifa called out.

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“…Huh? Really? Didn’t Miharu just say it was complete?” Celia cocked her head, looking at Miharu.

“Yes. Because we still haven’t said the magic words to make it taste even better,” Latifa huffed proudly and puffed up her modest, still-developing chest.

“Magic words…?” As a sorcerer, Celia’s eyes widened in interest.

“Hehehe! I’m going to say them now, before it gets cold.” Latifa grinned mischievously.

“Make it delicious, ruff ruff kyun!”

Her fox ears twitched as she used both hands to make a heart shape and poured her love into the omurice.

“W-What… is that…?” Celia asked, her face a deep red.

“They’re magic words to add love to the omurice. Now it’s your turn, you two! Let’s see…”

Latifa brought her face up to Celia and Miharu’s ears, whispering something into them. She was probably teaching them the magic words.

“N-No way! I can’t say something that embarrassing!” Celia was taken aback, still flushed red. Miharu tried to smile to cover her shyness.

“I-It’s a little too much for me too…”

“Hmph, I can’t believe you two won’t give Onii-chan their love.” Latifa pouted a little.

“I-I didn’t say that!” Celia objected in a fluster.

“Really? Then let’s see you do what I taught you, Celia.”

“Ugh…”

“Professor, there’s no need to force yourself to do it.” Rio tried to offer a lifeline to Celia, who had effectively dug her own grave.

“I… I’m not forcing myself. M-Make it delicious, lovey-dovey kyun.”

With a bright red face and whisper of a voice, Celia made a heart shape with her hands. But she soon reached the limit

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of embarrassment she could take and buried her face in her hands with a groan.

Latifa excitedly turned to Miharu. “Now it’s your turn!”

“Umm…” Miharu was doused in anxiety, her voice more high-pitched than usual.

“That’s enough. You’re upsetting Miharu, so just leave it at that. Miharu, you don’t have to go along with her,” Rio sighed tiredly, then picked up the spoon to begin to eat.

“Ah, w-wait a minute!” Miharu called out to stop Rio.

“I-I’d feel bad for Celia if I-I was the only one who didn’t do it… So… M-Make it delicious, moe moe, kyun… Wah.” Miharu mumbled, making a heart with her hands.

Elemental ☆ Admission

In Japan, somewhere in the city…

It was springtime, and pale pink petals danced in the wind during the entrance ceremony for schools. Haruto was visiting the campus of the parent university of his affiliated school.

He wasn’t there because he was starting his tenure at university, but he was there to celebrate his upperclassman’s entrance.

“Congratulations, Satsuki.”

On the afternoon of the entrance ceremony, he waited a little earlier than their meetup time to offer words of congratulations to Satsuki, who arrived later.

“Thank you, Haruto. What do you think of my hakama? Does it suit me?” Satsuki giggled, lifting her arms lightly to show off her hakama.

“Yes, it’s beautiful. Both the hakama and you in it,” Haruto praised with a wide smile.

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Satsuki's cheeks reddened with embarrassment, before she turned her slightly reproachful eyes to Haruto. "...You sure don't have any hesitation saying things like that. And yet, it doesn't sound smug or fake at all."

"Umm, did I say something wrong?" Haruto asked awkwardly at Satsuki's gaze.

"Nope, you were completely on point. Thanks." Satsuki sighed lightly but thanked him happily anyway.

"But if you say that to every girl, you may make some people misunderstand your intent, so make sure you choose who you say it to even if it's just flattery," she pointed a finger at Haruto and added.

"It wasn't flattery. And I said it because it's you, Satsuki."

"..." Satsuki blinked for a few moments before turning her face diagonally away from Haruto.

"I really will misunderstand, stupid," she muttered so that Haruto couldn't hear.

"...Satsuki?" Haruto called out to her, wondering what was wrong.

"It's nothing, I'm just fed up with your inability to learn. Are Miharu and the others still on their way here?" Satsuki stated bluntly, looking around at their surroundings.

"Y-Yeah. There's still a little while before the meetup time." Haruto winced a little, glancing at the public clock nearby.

"Hmm. I guess we're on our own until then," Satsuki said casually.

"So it seems," Haruto replied normally.

Satsuki pouted a little before she suddenly watched the people passing by and turned to Haruto. "...By the way, does it feel like we're being stared at?" They were currently within the university campus, on the grounds right next to the affiliated school Haruto attended. Because of that, there were fewer people visiting for the entrance ceremony, but there were still bustling groups here and there.

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“Isn’t it because of you, Satsuki?”

“Me?”

“Because you’re beautiful in your hakama,” said Haruto.

“…T-That’s not true!” Satsuki was clearly embarrassed, but she must have been discontent with being the only one feeling embarrassed. “There aren’t many chances to be alone with a girl in a hakama. Good for you, right Haruto?” she asked him with a glare.

“Yes, indeed,” Haruto agreed with an amused chuckle.

“…For some reason, I just want to see you looking embarrassed, even if it’s the last thing I do.” Satsuki puffed up her cheeks and stared at Haruto.

“Why? Please, don’t.”

“Take that!” Satsuki cheekily hugged Haruto’s arm as he backed away warily. They were the spitting image of lovers, making the male students passing by glare at them with envy.

“Wha—Satsuki?!” Haruto finally felt embarrassed and blushed.

“It’s rare to be hugged by a girl in a hakama, so isn’t this great? If you want, I’ll even wear it again—just for you,” Satsuki said, looking at Haruto with a carefree smile.

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